



Catch of the Bay (Cedar Bay #1)

Author: *Matilda Martel*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Cedar Bay's most eligible bachelor is off the market... he just doesn't know it yet.

Rowan Malone—former high school heartthrob turned hometown hero—has built a good life in Cedar Bay. A steady business, a loyal crew, and a reputation as the “Catch of the Bay.” But the moment quirky, whip-smart Cilla moves in next door with her two unruly dachshunds and obsession with orcas, Rowan falls hard—and he’s not afraid to admit it.

Cilla’s just here to finish her dissertation, teach some history, and avoid distractions. But her charming new neighbor is impossible to ignore, especially when he keeps showing up with coffee, tools, and a smile that makes her forget her lesson plans.

Hes the hometown golden boy with a past. Shes the new girl who never expected to stay. But in a town like Cedar Bay, love has a way of rewriting the story.

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cilla

I tug my cardigan tighter as the coastal breeze whips through Cedar Bay's town square. After three months here, I still haven't adjusted to how the wind carries a persistent chill, even on sunny days like this one.

The farmer's market stalls form a cheerful labyrinth around the square's central gazebo, and I navigate between locals who all seem to know each other with practiced familiarity. Meanwhile, I'm still at that awkward stage where I recognize faces but struggle with names.

"Those apple tarts are divine," I say, eyeing the Sweetie's Bakery booth display. Michele said to bring whatever I want to book club, but first impressions matter, and showing up with store-bought cookies feels like admitting defeat before I've even started.

"You should try the hazelnut croissants," says a voice beside me. I turn to find a woman with salt-and-pepper hair and a Cedar Bay Elementary sweatshirt. "I'm Judith, by the way. You're the new one who bought the Callahan place, right?"

"Cilla," I offer, shaking her outstretched hand. "And yes, I'm still finding paint chips in my hair from the bedroom remodel."

"Well, Cilla," she says, her smile widening to something that immediately puts me on guard, "my son Ryan just moved back to town after finishing his residency in Portland. Doctor Ryan," she adds with a wink that makes my stomach clench.

Oh God. It's happening again.

"That's... nice," I manage, reaching for my wallet and signaling the bakery attendant. "I'll take six apple tarts and two hazelnut croissants, please."

"He's single," Judith continues, undeterred by my blatant attempt to end the conversation. "Very handsome. Takes after his father."

Another woman appears on my other side before I can formulate a polite rejection. "New in town?" she asks, though it's clearly not a question. "I'm Denise, Chamber of Commerce. My son Taylor runs the marina. Divorced, no kids, owns his own business." She says this like she's reading off a particularly impressive resume.

"Ladies, please," I say, forcing a laugh while accepting my pastry box. "I just moved here for some peace and quiet. I need to finish my dissertation, and I'm not exactly?—"

"Dissertation!" exclaims a third woman who has materialized from nowhere. "My Brandon has a doctorate in marine biology!"

I clutch my pastry box like a shield. Somehow, in the span of five minutes, I've gone from anonymous newcomer to potential daughter-in-law for half the mothers in Cedar Bay.

"I appreciate the... enthusiasm," I say, backing away slowly. "But I really need to get to my book club."

"At Michele's?" Denise asks. "Oh, that's perfect! Michele's brother-in-law is visiting from Seattle. He's such a nice man and works in tech. Very successful."

"Fudge," I mutter under my breath. I paste on my best professor smile—the one I use

when students try to explain why their paper is late for the third time. "Ladies, you're all very kind, but I'm currently focusing on my dissertation. No time for dating."

I take three deliberate steps backward, nearly colliding with a display of local honey jars. The vendor, an elderly man with kind eyes, gives me a sympathetic look.

"You'll want to run now," he stage-whispers. "Once the Cedar Bay Matchmaking Committee sets their sights on you, resistance is futile."

"Thanks for the tip," I say, and with a quick wave to my would-be matchmakers, I pivot and speed-walk toward the edge of the square.

I hear Judith call after me, "Ryan loves books! He could join your club!"

My pace quickens to just shy of an actual run. The last thing I need is some local doctor showing up at the book club, where I was hoping to make actual friends, not potential suitors. After Jason's and his condescending "Well, actually" corrections during my dissertation presentations, I've sworn off academic men. And doctors probably have the same God complex.

As I round the corner onto Lighthouse Avenue, I nearly crash into a solid flannel and coffee scent wall.

"Whoa there, Professor," says a familiar, irritatingly charming voice. "Are those pastries in danger of escaping?"

I look up to find Rowan Malone, my infuriatingly attractive neighbor, steadying me with one hand while the other rescues my tilting pastry box.

"The pastries are fine," I say, returning the box and adjusting my glasses. "I'm escaping the town matchmakers. Apparently, being single and new makes me

community property."

Rowan laughs, the sound rich and warm like the coffee he perpetually smells like.

"Ah, you've met the moms of Cedar Bay. They mean well."

"So does a hurricane before it destroys your house," I mutter.

"Need an escort to Michele's? I can run interference if we encounter any more well-meaning mothers with conveniently single sons."

I narrow my eyes. "And what would you get out of playing bodyguard?"

"The pleasure of your company for three blocks," he says with that crooked smile that does not make my stomach flutter. "And maybe one of those hazelnut croissants."

"Fine," I sigh, already regretting this decision. "But this isn't a date. And you're not getting a croissant. They're for book club."

"Of course not," Rowan agrees, falling into step beside me. "Though I should warn you—Michele's been talking about setting you up with her cousin for weeks."

I stop dead in the middle of the sidewalk. "Are you freaking kidding me?"

"Cedar Bay, population 4,312. The dating pool is significantly smaller, and you're fresh meat—so to speak." He shrugs those broad shoulders, looking far too amused at my predicament. "Pretty sure there's a town ordinance requiring all single women under forty to be matched within their first six months."

"Well, they can take their ordinance and shove it up—" I glance down at my pastry box, remembering my promise to myself. "—fudging municipal code."

Rowan raises an eyebrow. "Fudging?"

"I'm trying to curb my language," I explain, resuming my walk at a slightly more dignified pace. "Birdie and Brody are starting to repeat certain words."

"Your dachshunds were... cursing?"

"They're very impressionable."

He laughs again, and I hate that I notice the way his eyes crinkle at the corners. "I've heard your 'sailor moments' when I was working on your deck. Those dogs must have quite the vocabulary."

My cheeks heat. "You eavesdropped on me?"

"Hard not to when you're dropping 'f-bombs' at your computer at all hours of the day."

I sniff. "That particular word is perfectly acceptable for canine ears. It sounds like bark."

We turn onto Driftwood Lane, where Michele's cute bungalow sits three doors down from mine. The street is quiet except for the distant sound of waves against the shore and the occasional seagull cry.

"What's the book?" Rowan asks, nodding toward the worn paperback peeking out of my bag.

"'Seduced at Sundown'," I reply. "It's a historical thing." I avert my eyes and stop before admitting it's a spicy romance. Although, he'd need to be an idiot not to come to that conclusion on his own.

"Sounds steamy." Rowan laughs. "Who seduces who?"

I stop again, narrowing my eyes. "I haven't read that far. And that's really none of your business."

"Okay," Rowan holds his palms out in mock surrender. "You don't have to give me your murder face."

"I do not have a murder face!"

"You absolutely do. You wear it whenever you're grading papers in your office late at night, and it's the same face you make when I suggest we grab coffee sometime. It's terrifying, by the way."

I roll my eyes and resume walking. "That's my 'please stop asking' face."

"Which I would respect," he says, his tone shifting to something more genuine, "if I thought you meant it."

His words catch me off guard, and I glance up at him. Bad idea. His hazel eyes are warm in the afternoon sun, and there's none of his usual teasing in his expression.

"Rowan—"

"I know, I know," he says, holding up his hands in surrender. "You're busy. Dissertation. Teaching. Dogs with potty mouths. No time for dating. But..." He shoves his hands in his pockets, looking boyishly uncertain for the first time since I've known him. "Just coffee. As neighbors. That's all I'm asking."

We've reached Michele's front gate, and I hesitate, pastry box clutched to my chest like armor. The problem isn't that I don't want to have coffee with Rowan. The

problem is that I do. And that's dangerous territory.

"Let me think about it," I say finally, which is more than I've given him in the three months I've lived here.

His face brightens immediately. "Really?"

"Don't look so smug. It's not a yes."

"But it's not a no," he points out, that infuriating dimple appearing on his left cheek. "I'll take it."

Before I can respond, Michele's front door swings open. "Cilla! You're just in time! Oh, and you brought Rowan!" She claps her hands together like this is the most delightful surprise imaginable. "You should join us! We're discussing a particularly steamy scene in chapter twelve."

"He absolutely should not," I say quickly. "Rowan was just?—"

"Walking the professor safely past the matchmaking gauntlet," he finishes for me. "Though the offer is tempting."

Michele winks at him. "I bet it is. Those romance novels get quite educational."

"For the love of—" I start.

"I'll let you ladies enjoy your book club," Rowan says, backing away with a grin that makes my stomach do a completely unauthorized flip. "Cilla, think about that coffee."

"What coffee?" Michele asks, her eyes lighting up with interest.

"Nothing," I say, pushing past her into the house. "Just neighborly harassment."

"Harassment, hmm?" Michele follows me inside, closing the door behind us. "Is that what we're calling sexual tension these days?"

"There is no tension," I insist, setting the pastry box on her dining table where three other women are already seated. "Sexual or otherwise."

"Honey," says a woman I recognize as the librarian, Greta, "I could feel the tension from in here. And I'm practically blind without my contacts."

I feel my cheeks burning. "Can we please talk about the book? I have notes on the historical inaccuracies in the Duke's wardrobe."

The women exchange knowing looks but mercifully drop the subject as I distribute pastries. As I take my seat, my phone buzzes with a text.

Unknown Number: In case you decide on that coffee. Enjoy your book club, Professor. Try not to corrupt those dachshunds with any new vocabulary. - R

I quickly slip my phone back into my pocket, fighting the smile that threatens to betray me.

"So," Michele says, opening her book with dramatic flair, "shall we discuss how the Duke managed to untie all those corset strings while one hand caressed her breasts?"

I choke on my first bite of apple tart as the group dissolves into giggles. This is why I need female friends. Three months of Rowan's flirtation and my dissertation research have left me craving ordinary conversation that doesn't involve European history or deflecting compliments.

"I have questions about the historical accuracy," I begin, pulling out my notebook where I've jotted down anachronisms.

"Of course you do," Michele says with an affectionate eye roll. "Our resident historian can't help herself."

"The buttons on his waistcoat weren't introduced until?—"

"Cilla," Greta interrupts gently, "we love your historical insights, but first, we need to discuss that scorching scene in the library." She fans herself with her paperback. "And then you need to tell us about the man trying to get your attention since you moved in."

I sink lower in my chair. "There's nothing to tell."

"That's not what I've heard," says a redhead whose name I think is Penny. "My husband works for Cedar Bay Construction. He says Rowan hasn't dated anyone in months, which is apparently some kind of record. You know he's the catch of Cedar Bay. I think every woman in town has had a crush on him at some point in time."

"He's just being neighborly," I insist, though my traitorous heart beats a little faster.

"Neighborly is bringing over a casserole when you move in," Michele says. "Not finding excuses to walk past your house every morning or offering to rebuild your entire deck for free."

"He did what now?" Greta leans forward, eyes wide behind her glasses.

"It wasn't free," I clarify. "I paid for materials."

"Honey, that man charges \$75 an hour for labor," Penny says. "Trust me, he wasn't

doing it for the money."

I fidget with my napkin. "Can we please return to the Duke's historically inaccurate buttons?"

"Fine," Michele sighs dramatically. "But first, a toast." She raises her wine glass. "To new friends, steamy Dukes, and the men who rebuild our decks while we pretend not to notice them."

"I notice him," I mutter, accepting a glass of wine. "That's the problem."

The women erupt in victorious laughter, and I realize I've walked right into their trap. I should have stuck with the buttons.

"I knew it!" Michele crows. "Pay up, ladies."

To my horror, both Greta and Penny reach for their purses.

"You were betting on me?" I sputter.

"On whether you'd admit you're attracted to him before the end of the book club," Greta explains, passing a twenty to Michele. "I thought you'd hold out longer."

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rowan

I watch the door close behind Cilla, her auburn hair catching the porch light one last time before disappearing into Michele's house. For a second, I consider hanging around like some lovesick teenager, but even I'm not that pathetic. Yet.

The walk back to my truck feels longer than it should. Cedar Bay's quiet streets are peaceful tonight, the calm that makes a man overthink. Lately, all my thoughts have circled back to one frustratingly brilliant woman who seems completely immune to what Fox calls my "small-town charm offensive."

Twenty minutes later, I'm pushing through the door of The Anchor, the familiar smell of beer and fried food hitting me like an old friend. Fox and Cole, two of my oldest friends, are already at our usual corner booth, beers in hand and shit-eating grins on their faces.

"Look who finally showed up," Cole calls out. "How's the professor?"

I slide into the booth, snagging his untouched beer. "Her name is Cilla, which I believe is short for Priscilla."

"We know her name," Cole says, signaling the bartender for another round. "The whole town knows her name because you won't shut up about her."

The waitress drops off a beer, and I take a long pull before answering. "She's fine. Just walked her to book club."

"Book club," Fox repeats, sounding like I said, "strip club." "Jesus, Malone. You've got it bad."

"It's getting sad, man," Cole adds, leaning forward. "Tobias says you rescheduled that Miller job just so you could 'accidentally' bump into her at the coffee shop."

I shrug, not bothering to deny it. "The Miller job could wait. They've been dragging their feet for weeks."

"She's not interested," Fox says flatly. "How many times has she shot you down now? Five? Six?"

"She hasn't shot me down," I protest, though the words sound weak, even to me. "She's just... focused on her work."

Cole snorts. "Right. And I'm just focused on becoming the next Bachelor."

"Seriously," Fox continues, his voice taking on that annoying big-brother tone he gets when he thinks he's being helpful. "At least a dozen women in this town would drop everything for a chance with you. Remember Amber? She literally left her number on your windshield last week."

"I'm not interested in Amber."

"You're not interested in anyone except the one woman who won't give you the time of day," Cole points out.

I stare at my beer, watching the condensation run down the glass. These guys don't get it. Hell, I barely get it myself. All I know is that from the moment I saw Cilla struggling with those boxes on moving day, those two ridiculous dachshunds tangling themselves in her legs, something clicked into place.

"You don't understand," I finally say. "Cilla's different."

"Different, how?" Fox challenges.

"She sees me." The words come out before I can stop them. "Everyone in this town—hell, everyone since high school—they see the quarterback or the soldier, the guy with the construction company, or whatever the hell else they want to see. She doesn't care about any of that."

Fox and Cole exchange a look I know too well. It's the "Rowan's lost his mind" look.

"So she... what? Ignores you completely, and that's somehow better?" Cole asks.

I shake my head. "No, she challenges me. Last week, I mentioned reading that book about the Pacific Northwest maritime history"—

"You read a maritime history book?" Fox interrupts, looking genuinely shocked.

"Yes, asshole, I read books." I run a hand through my hair, frustrated. "Anyway, she didn't just nod and smile like most people do when I say anything remotely intelligent. She argued with me about the author's take on indigenous fishing rights for twenty minutes. Twenty minutes of conversation where she wasn't looking at her watch or phone."

"Sounds riveting," Cole says dryly.

"It was," I say, dead serious. "And when Cilla talks about her research or those damn whales she loves so much, she gets this light in her eyes..." I trail off, realizing I sound like a character in one of those romance novels my mom keeps on her nightstand.

Fox leans back, studying me. "So you're really not giving up on this one?"

"Not a chance."

"Even though she thinks you're just another pretty face trying to get in her pants?"

I wince. "Cilla doesn't think that."

"You sure?" Cole asks. "Because from what I've seen, Cilla treats you like you're one of her students who forgot to turn in his homework."

That stings because there's some truth to it. Cilla's polite but distant. Like she's built a wall specifically designed to keep out men like me.

"Look," I say, leaning forward. I know what it looks like, but there's something there. When I helped her with that leaky pipe last month, we talked for hours afterward. And sometimes, I catch her looking at me when she thinks I won't notice."

"Probably wondering why you keep showing up on her doorstep," Fox mutters.

I drain my beer and set it down with more force than necessary. "You know what? You guys can think whatever you want. I'm not quitting on this."

"Even if it means making a complete fool of yourself?" Cole asks.

"Wouldn't be the first time," I say with a shrug. "Besides, Cilla's worth it."

Fox sighs heavily. "Fine. But when this blows up in your face—and it will—don't come crying to us."

"I'll cry to Tobias instead," I say with a grin. "He's more sympathetic."

"Tobias would only go easy because he works for you," Cole points out.

I laugh, but my mind's already drifting back to Cilla. To the way she tucked her hair behind her ear when I dropped her off, that slight hesitation before she thanked me for the walk. There was something there, something real. I'm sure of it.

"Another round?" the waitress asks, appearing at our table.

"Definitely," I say, then turn back to my friends. "Look, I get it. You think I'm setting myself up for a spectacular crash and burn. But here's the thing—I've dated half the eligible women in this town, and it's always the same. They like the idea of me, not the actual me."

Fox rolls his eyes. "Poor Rowan, too handsome for his own good."

"Fuck off," I say without heat. "You know what I mean. With Cilla, I don't have to be Cedar Bay's golden boy. I can just be... me."

Cole's expression softens slightly. "And who exactly is that? Because from where I'm sitting, you've been playing the same role since high school."

His words hit harder than I expected. Have I? The thought is uncomfortable enough that I push it aside.

"Maybe that's why I need someone like her," I admit. "Someone who doesn't care about my touchdown record or how many houses we built last year."

The waitress returns with our beers, and there's a moment of silence as we all take a drink.

"Alright," Fox finally says. "If you're really serious about this woman?—"

"I am."

"Then maybe you're going about it all wrong. The Rowan Malone charm offensive clearly isn't working."

I frown. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Cole leans forward. "It means stop trying so hard to impress her. From what you've said, she's not looking for another relationship, right? Especially not with someone she probably sees as just another distraction."

"So what, I should just give up?" The idea sits like a stone in my stomach.

"No," Fox says slowly, like he's thinking it through. "You should be her friend."

I stare at him. "Cilla's friend?"

"Yeah, her actual friend. Not the guy who's obviously waiting for his chance to ask her out again. Get to know her without all the pressure."

"That's... actually not terrible advice," I admit, surprised.

Cole nods. "Besides, you said she's into all that academic stuff, right? Maybe show her you're interested in that, too. And not just because you want to get in her pants."

"I never said?—"

"We know, we know," Fox interrupts, holding up his hands. "You respect her mind, ambition, and extensive knowledge of killer whales."

"Orcas," I correct automatically. "They're actually dolphins, not whales. Cilla

mentioned that the first time we talked about her fascination with them."

Cole and Fox exchange another look, this one tinged with something close to sympathy.

"You've got it worse than I thought," Cole says, shaking his head.

I run my thumb along the condensation on my glass, not bothering to argue. Fox and Cole are right—I do have it bad. And maybe they're right about the rest, too. Perhaps I've been coming on too strong and too obviously interested.

"So what would that even look like?" I ask after a moment. "Being her friend?"

Fox shrugs. "I don't know, man. What do friends do? Talk about stuff they both care about. Help each other out without expecting anything in return."

"I already do that," I protest. "I fixed Cilla's porch step, helped with that pipe, walked her to?—"

"While making it obvious you want more," Cole interrupts. "That's different."

He's not wrong. Every interaction I've had with Cilla has been tinged with my attraction to her, and hope that she'll see me differently this time. No wonder she keeps her distance.

"Alright," I say slowly. "So I back off. Be her friend. Then what?"

"Then nothing," Fox says. "Maybe that's all it ever is. Are you ready for that possibility?"

The question lands like a sucker punch. Am I ready to accept that Cilla might never

see me as anything more than a friendly neighbor? The automatic "hell no" that rises to my lips surprises me with its intensity.

"I don't know," I admit. "But I'm willing to try. Cilla's worth knowing, even if..." I trail off, not wanting to finish the thought.

"Even if she never falls for your considerable charms?" Cole supplies with a smirk.

I flip him off, but there's no heat behind it. "Something like that."

"Well, I'll be damned," Fox says, leaning back in his seat. "Rowan Malone, willing to be friend-zoned. I never thought I'd see the day."

"Don't be an ass," I mutter, but I'm smiling despite myself. "Besides, who knows? Maybe once she gets to know the real me?—"

"And there it is," Cole laughs. "The eternal optimist returns."

I shrug unapologetically. "Can't help it. But I'll try it your way. Friendship first."

"To friendship," Fox says, raising his glass in a mock toast. "May it bring you exactly what you deserve."

I clink my glass against him, then Cole's, ignoring the doubt already creeping around the edges of my resolution. Can I really be content with just being Cilla's friend? I think of her smile this evening when I made some dumb joke about her book club selection, the way her eyes crinkled at the corners, and I know the answer.

No. But I'll take what I can get.

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cilla

I take a sip of Michele's overly sweet sangria and try to maintain my scholarly composure. The book club meeting has taken a turn I should have anticipated but foolishly didn't.

"So, Cilla," Diane leans forward, her blonde highlights catching in the pendant lighting above Michele's farmhouse table. "What do you think about page one-fifty-three? Remind you of anyone?" She winks so dramatically it's practically a facial spasm.

I know exactly what's on page one-fifty-three. A gratuitous scene involving the brooding gardener exposing himself to Lady Eleanor with salacious results. Subtle.

"I think the author's metaphors are heavy-handed," I say, straightening my shoulders. "The economic undertones of class disparity between the characters actually reflect?—"

"Oh please," Michele interrupts, refilling wine glasses around the circle. "We're not in your history lecture, Professor Griffin. We want to know if you've noticed how much the hot gardener in this book sounds exactly like Rowan Malone."

The entire room erupts in giggles. Even Mrs. Caldwell, who must be pushing seventy, is nodding enthusiastically.

"For fudge's sake," I mutter under my breath, then louder: "I barely know the man. He's just my neighbor."

“Who happens to be the most eligible bachelor in Cedar Bay,” Tara adds.

“And who happens to stare at you like you’re the last lifeboat on the Titanic,” Michele chimes in.

I feel my cheeks warming, and it’s not from the sangria. “Can we please return to the actual book? I had some thoughts about the historical inaccuracies in the portrayal of Victorian social customs?—”

“Historical inaccuracies?” Diane snorts. “Honey, nobody reads these books for a history lesson.”

“I do,” I say primly, which earns me more laughter.

“All I’m saying,” Michele continues, leaning in conspiratorially, “is that a man who builds things with his hands all day probably knows how to use them in other ways, too.”

“Oh my god,” I groan, wondering if my dachshunds, Birdie and Brody, would judge me for abandoning book club altogether. Probably not. They’d understand. They’re excellent judges of character.

“I’m actually focusing on finishing my dissertation right now,” I say, attempting to redirect. “Which means I don’t have time for... distractions.”

“Distractions?” Mrs. Caldwell pipes up. “In my day, we called them ‘husbands.’”

More laughter. I take another sip of sangria and silently calculate how many pages of research I could be reviewing instead of sitting here being the subject of Cedar Bay’s favorite hobby: matchmaking.

“Let me tell you something,” Michele says, pointing her finger at me with such conviction that sangria sloshes dangerously close to the rim of her glass. “Dissertations don’t keep you warm at night.”

“Actually, my electric blanket does a fantastic job,” I counter, earning a few chuckles.

“Besides,” I add, flipping through the dog-eared paperback, desperate to move on, “if we’re going to talk about unrealistic portrayals, can we discuss how Lady Eleanor manages to have her corset removed in approximately three seconds on page one-sixty-seven? Having studied Victorian clothing, I can assure you it would take significantly longer.”

“Maybe you need someone with experience,” Diane suggests with another wink.

“In Victorian corset removal? I doubt Rowan has that particular skill set,” I say dryly.

Mrs. Caldwell cackles. “Oh, I bet that boy could figure it out.”

I’m about to launch into my prepared discussion points about the novel’s historical context when my phone buzzes. I glance down to see a text from my sister Prue: *How’s the book club? Discussing literature or your love life?*

My sister knows me too well. I quickly type: *The latter. Send help.*

“Ladies,” I say, setting my phone down. “I actually prepared some notes about the author’s treatment of?—”

“Don’t change the subject,” Michele interrupts. “I saw Rowan helping you unload your car last weekend. He carried that massive bookcase like it was nothing.”

I feel myself blushing again. Yes, Rowan had insisted on helping after seeing me struggle with the antique oak bookcase I'd found at an estate sale. And yes, how his muscles flexed under his t-shirt as he maneuvered it through my narrow doorway had been... educational.

"He was being neighborly," I insist.

"Neighborly would be borrowing a cup of sugar," Tara says. "That man wants to borrow a lot more than baking ingredients."

"For the love of—can we please discuss the book?" I'm practically begging now. "There's a fascinating subplot about women's suffrage that's barely been mentioned?—"

"Fine," Michele sighs dramatically. "But only because you look like you might spontaneously combust if we continue."

"Thank you," I say with genuine relief.

"But," she adds, "we're not done with this conversation. That man has been single too long, and you, my dear, need to stop hiding behind your books."

I open my mouth to protest that I'm not hiding—I'm pursuing my career goals—when the doorbell rings.

"Who could that be?" Michele wonders aloud, getting up to answer.

I take the opportunity to gulp down more sangria, grateful for the interruption. The last thing I need is more discussion about my non-existent love life. I have a dissertation to finish, two dachshunds to raise, and absolutely no interest in becoming another notch on Rowan Malone's bedpost, no matter how impressively he can lift

furniture.

I hear voices at the door, and suddenly, the entire room goes quiet. Too quiet. All eyes turn toward me with barely contained glee, and my stomach drops.

“Cilla!” Michele calls from the entryway, her voice pitched unnaturally high. “Someone’s here to see you!”

The universe has a twisted sense of humor. I know exactly who it is before I turn around, but I silently pray to whatever literary gods might be listening that I’m wrong.

I’m not.

Rowan Malone fills the doorway, all six-foot-four of him. The town’s most eligible bachelor, the man who supposedly has women lining up around the block, looks like he might trip over his tongue. “I, uh, was just heading out on the boat. I just heard the J-pod was just spotted near Lopez Island.”

The room has gone entirely silent, which might be worse than the teasing. I can practically hear everyone’s mental calculations as they watch us.

“Was it? Oh my God, that pod has two calves.” I respond, genuinely interested despite myself.

His face lights up. “I wouldn’t interrupt your evening, but I just heard and didn’t want to ship out without giving you the heads up.”

Before I can answer, Michele steps in. “Cilla was just telling us how fascinated she is with local marine life. Weren’t you, Cilla?”

I shoot her a look that could freeze sangria. “I was actually discussing Victorian literature, and Rowan’s already been made aware of my love of orcas.”

Rowan’s grin widens, and there’s something about the way his eyes crinkle at the corners that makes my heart do an annoying little flip. “Just thought you might want to grab your binoculars. I’ve got room on the boat if you’re interested.”

Every woman in the room seems to hold her breath collectively. I can practically hear the silent screaming in their heads.

“I...” My brain short-circuits momentarily. The thought of seeing the J-pod up close is genuinely tempting. Those magnificent creatures, their dorsal fins cutting through the water, the calves swimming alongside their mothers—it’s the kind of research opportunity that doesn’t come along every day.

But then I glance back at the circle of women, their expressions a mixture of glee and expectation, and I know I can’t give them the satisfaction.

“That’s incredibly thoughtful,” I say carefully, “but we’re in the middle of discussing?—”

“Go!” Michele practically shouts, making me jump. “For God’s sake, Cilla, we’ll discuss Victorian corsets next month.”

“Corsets?” Rowan repeats, eyebrow raised, and I want to melt into Michele’s hardwood floors.

“Historical accuracy in literature,” I clarify, feeling my cheeks burn. “It’s a whole thing.”

“She’s very passionate about it,” Mrs. Caldwell adds helpfully. “Almost as passionate

as she is about marine mammals.”

I shoot her a betrayed look.

“I have papers to grade tonight,” I say weakly.

“The orcas won’t wait for your grading schedule,” Tara points out.

Rowan shifts his weight, looking suddenly unsure. “I don’t want to interrupt your evening. Just thought I’d offer since you mentioned wanting to see them.”

There’s something in his expression—a genuine disappointment—that catches me off guard. This isn’t the cocky construction company owner who’s been flirting with me since I moved in. He looks like a kid who’s been told Christmas is canceled.

“I need to check on Birdie and Brody,” I say, grasping at straws.

“I can swing by your place first,” he offers immediately. “Let them out while you grab whatever you need.”

“My camera’s at home,” I admit, weakening.

“Perfect. We’ll stop there first.”

The room has gone utterly still. Michele is practically vibrating with excitement.

“Fine,” I sigh, knowing I’ll never hear the end of it either way. “But this is a sight-seeing expedition, not a date.”

Rowan holds up his hands. “Absolutely. Just two neighbors appreciating local wildlife.”

“Exactly.” I gather my things, avoiding eye contact with everyone. "Sorry to duck out early, ladies."

“Oh, we understand completely,” Diane says, smirking.

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cilla

The wind whips my hair into a tangled mess as Rowan's boat cuts through the water of Cedar Bay. I should have brought a hair tie, but I was so excited when he texted about the J-Pod sighting that I barely remembered my jacket.

"You okay over there, Professor?" Rowan calls over the engine noise, his hazel eyes crinkling at the corners when he smiles.

"Perfect," I answer, and for once, I'm not being polite. The bay stretches out around us, a sheet of rippling silver under the cloud-dappled sky, and somewhere ahead are the orcas I've dreamed of seeing up close since I was a kid, with Free Willy posters plastering my bedroom walls.

Rowan throttles down the engine as we approach a cluster of boats in the distance. "Listen, I know I ambushed you this morning. I just thought?—"

"That I'd want to see them," I finish for him. "You were right."

He looks relieved, his broad shoulders relaxing slightly as he navigates toward the gathering of vessels. I'm still not entirely used to how... large he is. Not just tall but solid, like something built to withstand Pacific storms.

"I'm sorry if I've been a pain," I say, surprising myself with the admission. "I'm not usually so..."

"Prickly?" he offers with a teasing grin.

"I was going to say 'reserved,' but fine, prickly works too." I roll my eyes but can't stop my smile. "It's just that I moved here to focus on my dissertation and teaching. Dating isn't exactly on my academic calendar."

"Who said anything about dating?" Rowan asks innocently, but there's that dimple in his left cheek that appears when he's being deliberately charming.

"Oh, please. The entire town has informed me of your reputation, Mr. Malone."

He winces. "Small towns."

"Microscopic," I agree.

We fall silent as he cuts the engine further, letting us drift closer to where the other boats have gathered. I pull out my binoculars, scanning the water's surface.

"I'm interested in your friendship," I say quietly, not looking at him. "For now. If that's something you'd consider."

When I finally glance over, he's watching me with an expression I can't quite read. Something more serious than his usual easy grin.

"I can do friendship," he says finally. "Though I should warn you, I'm exceptionally good at it. You might get addicted."

I'm about to deliver what would have been an excellent sarcastic comeback when I see it—a sleek black fin breaking the surface about fifty yards away.

"Oh my god," I whisper, grabbing his arm without thinking. "Rowan, look!"

His whole face lights up, not at the orca, but at my excitement. "Three o'clock," he

says, pointing toward where more fins begin to surface.

I gasp, fumbling with my phone to capture what I'm seeing, but quickly abandon the effort. Some moments deserve full attention.

"There must be at least six of them," I breathe, counting the distinctive dorsal fins as they rise and fall in a synchronized dance. "Look at that one—the tall, straight fin. That's likely a mature male."

Rowan nods, his face alight with boyish wonder. "They've been coming back more regularly these past few years. Conservation efforts are working."

I glance at him, surprised. "You follow the marine conservation work?"

He shrugs, suddenly looking almost sheepish. "I read."

"You read scientific journals about orca populations?"

"Not exclusively," he says with a small smile. "But when you grow up on these waters..."

The sentence hangs between us, and I feel a small shift in my perception of him. The quarterback-turned-soldier-turned-construction-magnate reads scientific literature in his spare time. Interesting.

The largest orca suddenly breaches, his massive black and white body arcing through the air before crashing back into the water with a spectacular splash. I squeal in delight, grabbing Rowan's arm again.

"Did you see that? Did you see that?" I'm practically bouncing, my academic composure completely abandoned.

Rowan's laugh is deep and genuine. "I did. Though I'm enjoying your reaction almost as much as the show."

I should be embarrassed by my childlike enthusiasm, but I can't bring myself to care. Not when the pod is now swimming in graceful circles around us, their sleek bodies gleaming in the afternoon sun.

"They're so much more magnificent than anything I've read," I whisper, transfixed as a mother and calf swim past, barely twenty feet from the boat.

"Some things you just have to experience firsthand," Rowan says softly, and when I look up, he's watching me instead of the orcas.

My cheeks warm, but I don't look away. "Thank you for bringing me out here."

"Does this earn me friend points?" he asks, his lips quirking.

"Significant friend points," I admit. "Though don't let it go to your head. I still have standards."

"Noted, Professor." He reaches over and tucks a wild strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers barely grazing my cheek. "Standards are good."

The touch is brief and casual, but something electric shoots through me. I clear my throat and turn back to watch the orcas, willing my heartbeat to slow.

Friendship, Cilla. You said friendship.

But as the afternoon stretches on, with Rowan pointing out landmarks along the shore and telling me stories about growing up in Cedar Bay, I wonder if friendship with Rowan Malone will be as straightforward as I'd hoped.

Nothing about him seems straightforward, and that's the problem.

I force my thoughts back to the orcas, to my dissertation, to all the reasons I moved to Cedar Bay that had nothing to do with hazel-eyed contractors with surprising depths.

"Look!" Rowan points to where the largest male breaches again. "They're putting on quite the show for you."

"For us," I correct him, though I'm secretly pleased at the thought that these magnificent creatures might be performing just for me. "I can't believe how close they're coming to the boat."

"They're curious," he says, leaning against the side of the boat, his shoulder barely brushing mine. "J-Pod is known for being more interactive with boats than some of the other pods."

"You really do know your orcas," I say, impressed despite myself.

He shrugs, that half-smile playing at his lips. "I've spent my whole life on this bay. These waters are home."

The simple sincerity in his voice catches me off guard. There's something deeply appealing about someone so rooted in a place and connected to the natural world. My academic life has always been nomadic—California for my undergrad, Boston for my master's, and now here for my PhD work. I've never felt the kind of belonging that radiates from Rowan when he talks about Cedar Bay.

"What made you come back after the Army?" I ask before I can stop myself. "You could have built your business anywhere."

His expression grows thoughtful as he watches the orcas. "After my tours, I needed

somewhere that made sense. The world gets... complicated out there. Cedar Bay has always been simple for me. Clear water, clear purpose."

"Building things," I say.

"Rebuilding myself, at first," he admits, and there's a vulnerability in his voice I haven't heard before. "The construction came later."

I don't know what to say to that, so I just nod. We stand in comfortable silence as the orcas continue their ballet around us, their sleek bodies gliding through the water with impossible grace.

"Does St. Agnes feel like home yet?" he asks after a while.

"God, no," I laugh. "I still get lost trying to find the faculty parking lot. And my students look at me like I'm an alien when I reference anything from before 2010."

"The burden of being the cool young professor," he teases.

"There is nothing cool about me, Rowan. I have color-coded sticky notes for my dissertation research. I talk to my dachshunds in complete sentences. Last Friday night, I stayed up until 2 AM reorganizing my digital photo albums by historical period."

"Sounds pretty cool to me," he says, and the worst part is he seems to mean it.

"You're ridiculous," I mutter, but I'm smiling.

"And you're interesting," he counters. "Cedar Bay doesn't get many PhD historians who look like you and talk about orcas with that kind of passion."

"There are dozens of us," I deadpan. "We have secret meetings where we discuss dorsal fin variations and migration patterns."

He laughs, the sound warming me more than it should. "I'd believe it."

The largest orca suddenly leaps completely out of the water, spinning slightly before crashing back down with a thunderous splash. Several boats erupt in cheers and applause.

"Holy crap!" I exclaim, momentarily forgetting my location. "Did you see that? He must be thirty feet long!"

Rowan raises an eyebrow at my word choice.

"Crap?" he repeats, his lips twitching. "Is that the best you can do?"

"I keep the profanity for special occasions," I inform him. "And for when my students aren't listening."

"I'd like to hear that someday," he says, and that flirtatious edge creeps back into his voice.

"Friends don't corrupt other friends' professional vocabulary," I remind him.

"Fair enough, Professor." He checks his watch. "We should probably head back soon. The light will be fading in an hour or so."

I nod, though I'm reluctant to leave this magical bubble where orcas dance, and complicated men say simple things that make me question all my careful planning.

"Thank you again," I say as he starts the engine. "This was... perfect."

"Anytime," he says, and I believe him. That's the problem.

As we turn back toward shore, I take one last look at the pod, committing their graceful movements to memory. The largest male's fin cuts through the water, a powerful silhouette against the darkening horizon.

"They'll be back," Rowan says, reading my thoughts. "And so will we."

We. Such a small word to cause such a complicated flutter in my chest.

"I'd like that," I admit, and I mean it more than I intended to.

The boat picks up speed, sending spray across my face. I close my eyes and let the salt water mingle with the wind, feeling more alive than I have in months. My dissertation waits on my laptop at home. My carefully planned, academically focused life waits in my little bungalow by the bay.

But for now, I'm here with Rowan Malone, watching orcas in Cedar Bay and wondering if friendship is going to be enough for either of us.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks as we near the marina, the wind carrying his voice to me.

I could lie and say something academic about orca migration or the historical significance of cetaceans in Pacific Northwest Indigenous cultures, but something about the fading light and the lingering magic of the afternoon makes me honest.

"I think Cedar Bay might be more complicated than I expected."

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rowan

I spot Cilla examining peaches at Murphy's Market like ancient artifacts that might reveal their secrets if she stares hard enough. Her forehead crinkles in concentration, and I swear it's the cutest damn thing I've seen all week.

"You know," I say, leaning against the produce display, "they're just peaches, not the Dead Sea Scrolls."

She looks up, those blue eyes flashing with amusement despite her attempt to appear annoyed. "These aren't 'just peaches,' Rowan. These are potential disappointments masquerading as fruit. Too hard now, mush tomorrow."

I chuckle, reaching past her to grab a bag of chips. "The Cedar Beach bonfire isn't exactly a formal dinner. We're talking snacks, beer, maybe some wine..."

"Wine," she says decisively. "Definitely wine."

Thirty minutes later, our cart contained an impressive array of cheese, crackers, suspicious peaches, and two bottles of wine that cost more than I'd typically spend. But Cilla insisted they were "appropriate for stargazing." I'm not about to argue with the professor.

"You realize we're going to a community bonfire, not hosting a gallery opening, right?" I tease as we load the bags into my truck.

"Just because it's casual doesn't mean it can't be civilized," she retorts, but a smile

plays at the corners of her mouth.

The drive to Cedar Beach is quick, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows across the road. I steal glances at her profile, wondering how I got lucky enough to have her agree to come tonight. After weeks of her shooting down my every attempt at flirtation, this feels like a minor miracle.

Families and couples are already setting up chairs around the unlit bonfire pile at the beach. Kids chase each other through the sand while older folks chat in clusters. It's the kind of small-town scene that made me return here after the Army.

I grab our blanket and cooler while Cilla collects her tote bag of carefully selected snacks. We find a spot slightly removed from the main crowd, with a clear view of the bonfire and the bay beyond.

"Perfect," she declares, arranging the blanket with precision.

As the sun begins to set, painting the sky in watercolor shades of orange and pink, I watch Cilla more than the horizon. She's meticulously laying out our picnic, her small hands working with efficient grace.

"You know," I say, uncorking the wine, "for someone who acted like she'd rather get a root canal than spend time with me, you sure put effort into tonight."

She laughs, a genuine sound that makes something in my chest tighten. "I never said I didn't want to spend time with you. I said I didn't have time for your obvious lines."

"Obvious?" I clutch my chest in mock offense. "I'll have you know my lines are artistically crafted and locally sourced."

She rolls her eyes but smiles, handing me a plate loaded with cheese, crackers, and

slices of those precious peaches. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. You don't need lines, Rowan. Half the women in Cedar Bay would throw themselves at you if you just grunted and pointed."

"But not you," I say, suddenly serious. The bonfire roars to life before us, someone having finally lit it. Golden light dances across her face, catching in her auburn hair.

"No," she agrees, taking a sip of wine. "Not me."

"Why is that?" I ask, genuinely curious. I've been wondering for weeks.

Cilla looks out at the water, the reflection of the flames rippling on its surface. "Because I've done the whole dating-a-guy-who-knows-he's-hot thing before. It gets old when they're constantly looking for validation."

"Ouch." I wince but can't deny there's some truth to it. "So you figured I was just another pretty face with an ego problem?"

"Something like that." She turns to face me fully now. "But then Mrs. Harrington told me how you rebuilt her porch for cost when she couldn't afford the full price. And Jenny at the café mentioned you watch her kids sometimes when her sitter cancels."

I feel my face warming, and it's not from the bonfire. "People talk too much in this town."

"They do," she agrees. "But sometimes what they say is interesting."

The night deepens around us. Families with young children start to pack up, leaving mostly couples and groups of friends. Someone's playing guitar on the other side of the fire, the soft music carrying over to us on the breeze.

"So what about you?" I ask, refilling our glasses. "Brilliant professor moves to a small town. There's got to be a story there."

Cilla hugs her knees to her chest, looking thoughtful. "I needed space to finish my dissertation. And... I needed to get away from academia for a bit. It can be suffocating sometimes."

"Suffocating how?"

"Everyone competing. Everyone trying to prove they're the smartest person in the room." She sighs. "My ex was the worst. He'd interrupt me during my presentations to 'clarify' points I was making perfectly well on my own."

"Sounds like a real charmer," I say dryly.

"Oh, he thought he was." She laughs, but there's an edge to it. "Anyway, when the position at St. Agnes opened up, it seemed perfect. Small classes, nice town, beautiful scenery. Room to breathe."

"And then I showed up with my obvious lines," I add with a grin.

"And then you showed up," she agrees, but she's smiling now, a genuine smile that reaches her eyes.

The night air grows cooler, and I notice Cilla shiver slightly. Without thinking, I wrap my arm around her shoulders. I expect her to pull away to make some comment about not needing my chivalry, but instead, she leans into me.

"So, what's your story?" she asks softly. "Former quarterback turned soldier turned builder. That's quite the resume."

I stare into the fire, gathering my thoughts. It's not something I talk about much.

"I was supposed to be the hometown hero," I say finally. "Football scholarship to UW, maybe even go pro. Then one bad tackle senior year, and suddenly I'm just another guy with a busted knee and no plan."

She nods, waiting for me to continue.

"The Army gave me direction when I needed it. Structure. Purpose." I take a sip of wine. "And when I got out, I realized I wanted to build things. Create something lasting, you know? Houses, decks, renovations—they stick around. They matter to people."

"Is that why you stayed in Cedar Bay?" she asks. "You could probably make more money with your skills in Seattle."

"Maybe." I shrug. "But this is home. My parents are here. And there's something about knowing your clients, seeing them at the grocery store or the post office. It means you can't half-ass the job."

Cilla laughs. "I imagine Mrs. Harrington would have some choice words if you did."

"Exactly. Plus..." I hesitate, feeling suddenly vulnerable. "I like the pace here—the way the whole town smells like salt and pine and how you can see every star at night."

As if on cue, we both look up. Above us, the night sky is a tapestry of stars, impossibly bright against the darkness. The bonfire has died down to glowing embers, and most other beachgoers have left. The guitarist packed up long ago. It's just us, the stars, and the gentle rhythm of waves against the shore.

"It's beautiful," she whispers.

"Yeah," I agree, but I'm looking at her profile, the curve of her cheek illuminated by starlight.

She turns, catching me staring, and for once, I don't try to play it cool or make a joke. I just hold her gaze, letting her see that this isn't a game to me. Maybe it never was.

"Rowan," she says, her voice barely audible over the sound of the waves.

"Yeah?"

"I think I misjudged you."

I smile. "Does that mean my obvious lines are working?"

She rolls her eyes, but there's no real annoyance behind it. "No. It means maybe you don't need lines at all."

And then she does something that surprises the hell out of me. She leans in, her hand resting against my cheek, and kisses me. It's tentative, as if she's testing the waters, but she's unsure she wants to enter. But when I respond, sliding my hand into her hair and pulling her closer, the kiss deepens into something that sends heat coursing through my entire body.

When we finally break apart, we're both out of breath. Cilla's eyes are wide, reflecting starlight and embers, and there's a flush on her cheeks that I doubt is just from the wine.

"Well," she says, sounding slightly dazed. "That was..."

"Yeah," I agree, feeling stupidly happy. "It was."

She laughs then, a slight, breathless sound. "Very articulate, Malone."

"You kiss me like that, and you expect coherent sentences?" I shake my head in mock dismay. "You have unreasonable standards."

Cilla smiles and leans her head against my shoulder, looking out at the bay where moonlight dances on gentle waves. "The water looks magical tonight," she says softly.

"Careful, Professor Griffin. That's not very scholarly language."

She elbows me gently in the ribs. "I'm allowed poetic observations outside of lecture halls."

We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes, my arm around her shoulders, her body warm against mine. The last few embers of the bonfire glow orange against the darkened beach.

"I should probably get you home," I say eventually, though it's the last thing I want to do. "Those dogs of yours will be wondering where you are."

"Birdie and Brody are fine. I left them enough food for the evening." She looks up at me, her expression unreadable in the dim light. "But maybe you're right."

I stand reluctantly, offering her my hand to help her up. As we pack our things, I can't stop stealing glances at her, still not quite believing this night happened. That kiss happened.

We walk back to my truck in companionable silence, hands occasionally brushing

against each other until I finally capture hers in mine. Cilla's fingers are small but strong, and she doesn't pull away.

"Thank you for tonight," she says as we reach the truck. "It was... unexpectedly nice."

"Unexpectedly?" I raise an eyebrow, loading our cooler into the back. "You had low expectations, huh?"

She shrugs, a smile playing on her lips. "Let's just say I'm pleasantly surprised."

"I'll take it," I laugh, opening her door for her. "Progress."

The drive back to her bungalow is quiet, but it's not awkward. It's the kind of silence that feels comfortable as if we've known each other much longer than we actually have. I rest my hand on her knee, and she covers it with her thumb, absently tracing circles on my skin.

When I pull up to her house, the porch light is on, and I can hear her dachshunds barking excitedly inside.

"Sounds like your welcoming committee is ready," I say, reluctant to let the night end.

"They're probably accusing me of abandoning them forever," Cilla laughs. "They have a flair for the dramatic."

I walk her to the door, our footsteps crunching on the gravel path. The porch light casts a warm glow across her face, making her eyes shine. Inside, the barking intensifies, accompanied by what sounds like frantic scratching at the door.

"Well," she says, fishing her keys from her bag, "this was..."

"Unexpectedly nice?" I offer, echoing her earlier words.

She smiles, looking down for a moment before meeting my eyes again. "I was going to say surprisingly wonderful."

My heart does a ridiculous little flip in my chest. "Even better."

We stand there, neither of us quite ready to say goodnight. The dogs continue their symphony of whines and barks.

"Birdie and Brody are going to have a conniption if I don't open this door soon," she says but makes no move to do so.

"Can't have that on my conscience," I say, stepping closer. "But before you go..."

I lean down, cupping her face with one hand, and kiss her again. This time, there's nothing tentative about it. Her arms wrap around my neck, and she rises on her tiptoes to meet me halfway. She tastes like wine and peaches, and I could happily stand here all night, but the dogs sound like they're about to break down the door.

When we pull apart, she looks dazed, and my expression matches hers.

"Wow," she whispers.

"Yeah," I agree, unable to form a more eloquent response. "So... can I see you tomorrow?"

She bites her lip, then nods. "I'd like that."

"Good," I say, reluctantly stepping back. "Because I'm not sure I could wait longer than that."

Cilla unlocks her door, and two small black and tan torpedoes immediately shoot out, circling her legs and then darting over to inspect me with suspicious sniffs.

"Birdie, Brody, this is Rowan," she says as if introducing me to roommates rather than dogs. "Be nice. He's the one who built your deck."

I crouch down, offering my hand for them to sniff.

Brody, the slightly larger one, gives my fingers a cautious lick while Birdie continues to eye me warily.

"Don't take it personally," Cilla says. "Birdie's the skeptical one. She'll warm up eventually."

"Like owner, like dog?" I tease, standing up again.

She rolls her eyes, but her smile gives her away. "Good night, Rowan. I'll see you tomorrow."

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cilla

I tap my finger against the stem of my wine glass, trying not to stare at Rowan across the table. The candlelight plays across his features in a way that's frankly unfair. Who looks that good in flickering amber light? It should be illegal.

"So your dissertation is on the Oregon Trail's impact on westward expansion?" he asks, leaning forward with genuine interest.

"Yes, with a particular focus on female voices and the spread of religion," I say, feeling that familiar academic excitement bubble up. "Everyone thinks the Gold Rush was the big draw, but actually—" I catch myself before I launch into full professor mode. "Sorry, I'm sure you didn't ask for the whole lecture."

Rowan's smile widens. "I wouldn't mind if you did. I like hearing you talk about things you're passionate about."

The sincerity in his voice catches me off guard. When he showed up at my door tonight, looking devastating in a blue button-down that made his hazel eyes seem greener, I reminded myself this was just dinner. Just because the absurdly attractive contractor down the street finally wore me down with his persistent charm doesn't mean I'm breaking my no-dating rule.

Yet here we are at Bella Vista, the little Italian trattoria overlooking Cedar Bay, and I'm having... fun. Actual fun. With a man who makes my stomach do that horrible butterfly thing I thought I'd outgrown.

“You’re staring,” he says, a hint of that trademark confidence returning.

“I’m evaluating,” I correct him, taking a sip of my Chianti.

“And? What’s the verdict, Professor Griffin?”

“Still collecting data,” I reply, but I can’t help smiling.

The waiter brings our entrées—cacio é pepe for me, osso buco for him—and Rowan immediately offers me a bite from his fork. It’s intimate in a way that makes my cheeks warm.

“So,” I say after swallowing, “tell me something you haven’t told anyone else in Cedar Bay.”

He considers this, his expression shifting to something more vulnerable. “I read poetry. Actual poetry books. It’s not something to share with the guys, but I enjoy them.”

“Shocking,” I tease. “The town heartthrob has hidden depths.”

“Don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to maintain.” He leans closer, voice dropping. “Your turn. Tell me something nobody knows about you.”

“I talk to my dogs in weird voices when nobody’s around,” I admit. “And I make up songs about what they’re doing. There’s the ‘Getting Ready for Walkies’ song and the ‘Please Stop Barking at the Mailman’ ballad. They also have extensive backstories about what they do when I’m at work. Birdie is working on a novel about the migratory patterns of birds of the Pacific Northwest, which is why she loves watching them from the bay window. Brody is working on his game, hoping to win the heart of Mrs. Caldwell’s Maltese. Of course, she’ll have to live with us because

he will still need his mama to cut the crust off his sandwiches.”

His laugh is warm and genuine. “You’re far too adorable for words, Cilla Griffin.”

“Thanks for noticing, Malone.”

The conversation flows easily after that, through dinner and dessert—a tiramisu we share with two forks, our hands occasionally brushing. The restaurant has mostly emptied out except for a few couples lingering over wine. When Rowan reaches across the table to brush a strand of hair from my face, I don’t pull away.

“I haven’t felt like this in... maybe ever,” he says quietly, the confidence momentarily replaced by something raw and honest. “I know you weren’t exactly thrilled when I first asked you out?—”

“Seven times,” I correct him, smiling. “You asked seven times.”

“Eight, actually. You were wearing headphones for one of them.”

“Persistent.”

“Worth it,” he counters, his eyes not leaving mine. “Every time you shot me down and still I couldn’t stop thinking about the beautiful girl with the dachshunds who scowls at me when I work without a shirt.”

I nearly choke on my wine. “I do not scowl at you!”

“You definitely do. It’s adorable.”

“It’s a professional concern for workplace safety,” I counter, but my face is burning.

Rowan laughs, then grows serious again. “Look, Cilla, I know you’ve been focused on your work, and I respect that. But I’m thrilled you finally said yes.”

The vulnerability in his expression makes my chest tighten. I take a deep breath and decide to be honest. “I have... feelings. Which is inconvenient because I had my whole ‘focus on my career’ plan all mapped out.”

“Feelings are the worst,” he agrees, his eyes crinkling.

“The absolute worst,” I nod, but I’m smiling. “But here we are.”

“Here we are,” he echoes, reaching for my hand across the table.

Just as his fingers brush mine, a sharp voice cuts through our bubble. “Rowan? Is that you?”

I look up to see a woman standing beside our table. Tall, blonde, perfect makeup despite the late hour. She’s looking at Rowan like he’s a lost possession she’s just rediscovered.

“Vanessa,” he says, and I don’t miss how his posture immediately stiffens. “What are you doing here?”

“Girls’ night,” she says, though I don’t see any other women with her. Her gaze shifts to me, eyes narrowing slightly. “And who’s this?”

“This is Cilla,” Rowan says, and I’m surprised by the protective note in his voice. “Cilla, this is Vanessa... an old friend.”

The way he hesitates on “friend” tells me everything I need to know. Ex-girlfriend. Possibly recent, but definitely significant.

“Charmed,” Vanessa says in a tone that suggests the exact opposite. “How do you two know each other?”

“We’re neighbors,” I say, suddenly aware of how casual I look in my simple wrap dress compared to her sleek cocktail attire.

“Oh! You must be the little professor who moved into the Callahan place. How cute.”

Little professor? I feel my smile freeze in place. “Yes, that’s me. Working on my PhD in American History.”

“How fascinating,” she says, in a tone that suggests she’d rather watch paint dry. Her attention swings back to Rowan. “I’ve been trying to call you. Didn’t you get my messages?”

Rowan shifts uncomfortably. “I’ve been busy with the Miller project.”

“Too busy to return a call?” Vanessa places a manicured hand on his shoulder and something hot and unpleasant flares in my chest. “We need to talk about what happened at Tessa’s wedding.”

Oh. So this is recent. Very recent. The butterflies in my stomach turn to lead.

“Now’s not the time, Vanessa,” Rowan says firmly, gently removing her hand.

“When is the time? You’ve been avoiding me for months.” She glances at me with a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “I’m sorry to interrupt your... dinner. Rowan and I have some unfinished business.”

“We don’t,” he says, his jaw tightening. “We finished our business three months ago.”

“That’s not what you said at the wedding,” she counters. “After those tequila shots?—”

“Vanessa.” His voice carries a warning.

I suddenly feel like I’m watching a tennis match where I’m also somehow the net. I reach for my water glass, needing something to do with my hands.

“I should probably—” I begin.

“Stay,” Rowan says immediately, his eyes meeting mine. “Please.”

Vanessa laughs a brittle sound. “Oh my god, is this a date? Rowan, honey, you can’t be serious.”

My cheeks burn. I’ve been called many things, but never so dismissively. Something inside me snaps.

“Actually,” I say, straightening my spine, “it is a date. A lovely one, until about thirty seconds ago.”

Vanessa’s perfectly sculpted eyebrows rise. “Well, aren’t you feisty for such a tiny thing? Rowan likes his women a bit more... substantial. Don’t you, Ro?”

“That’s enough,” Rowan says, standing up. “Vanessa, you need to leave.”

“After what happened between us?” Her voice rises, drawing the attention of the few remaining diners. “You said we’d talk!”

“I said I’d call you to clear things up,” he counters. “And I did. Three times. You didn’t like what I had to say, so you hung up. Every time.”

I sit there, increasingly uncomfortable, wondering what happened at this wedding. The romantic bubble we'd been in has definitively popped.

"Excuse me," I say quietly, pushing back my chair. "I need to use the restroom."

I escape to the ladies' room, leaning against the marble counter and staring at my reflection. My cheeks are flushed, and my eyes are too bright.

"Get it together, Griffin," I mutter to myself. "This is why you don't date. This is why you have dogs."

I take a deep breath, straighten my dress, and remind myself I'm a grown woman with a PhD in progress, not some insecure teenager. Whatever happened between Rowan and this woman at some wedding isn't my business. We're on one date. One. It's not like we've declared undying love.

So why does my chest hurt?

I splash cold water on my wrists, a trick my mother taught me to calm down. "It's fine. Totally fine. You'll finish dinner politely, go home, and remind yourself why focusing on your dissertation is smart."

The bathroom door swings open, and for a horrifying moment, I think it's Vanessa. Instead, it's an older woman with kind eyes.

"You okay, honey?" she asks, washing her hands at the sink beside me.

"Peachy," I reply, forcing a smile.

She gives me a knowing look. "That blonde out there is making quite a scene. Your fella looks mighty uncomfortable."

“He’s not my fella,” I say automatically.

“Well, he sent me to check on you, so I’d say he’d like to be.” She dries her hands. “For what it’s worth, I’ve lived in Cedar Bay my whole life. Rowan Malone’s dated half the eligible women in town, but I’ve never seen him look at anyone like he looks at you.”

She leaves before I can respond, which is probably good because I have no idea what to say.

I take one more steadying breath. “Okay, Cilla. You’re going back out there, handling this with dignity, then going home to your dogs who, unlike men, are consistently reliable.”

When I return to the dining room, Vanessa is gone, and Rowan is sitting with his head in his hands. He jumps up when he sees me.

“I am so sorry,” he says immediately. “That was completely inappropriate, and I?—”

“It’s fine,” I say, sliding back into my seat.

“It’s not fine. It was awful.” He looks genuinely distressed. “Vanessa and I dated last year. It ended badly.”

“And then there was a wedding with tequila shots,” I add, keeping my tone neutral.

Rowan winces. “Her cousin’s wedding. I was there as a friend of the groom. We talked, that’s all. She’s been trying to... reconnect since then.”

“You don’t owe me explanations,” I say, reaching for my wine. “We’re on one date.”

“I want to owe you explanations,” he says quietly. “I like you, Cilla. I like you in a way that scares the absolute shit out of me.”

The sincerity in his voice catches me off guard. I study his face, looking for any sign of the smooth operator I’d assumed he was when he first started flirting with me. All I see is raw honesty.

“That’s a pretty big statement for a first date,” I finally say.

“I know. I’m not usually like this.” He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up in an annoyingly attractive way. “But from the moment you moved in down the street, with those ridiculous little dogs and that stink-eye whenever I waved at you?—”

“I don’t think I ever gave you a stink-eye.” I interrupt him.

“—I haven’t been able to think straight.” He reaches for my hand again, and this time, I let him take it. “I know you’re focused on your career. I respect that. But I’d like to see where this could go.”

His thumb traces small circles on my palm, and I try to ignore how such a simple touch sends warmth up my arm.

“What about Vanessa?” I ask. “She seems to think there’s something unfinished there.”

“The only unfinished business is her accepting that we’re over.” His eyes stay locked on mine. “I’m not going to lie and say I’ve been a saint. I’ve dated a lot of women in this town. But none of them made me feel like I needed to be better to be worthy of them. Not until you.”

“You hardly know me,” I point out.

“I know enough.” His smile turns sheepish. “I may have asked around about you.”

“Stalker,” I tease, but I’m smiling too.

“Research,” he corrects. “And I’d like to know more. Much more.”

The waiter approaches with our check, and Rowan takes it before I can reach for my wallet.

“I asked you out,” he says. “Next time, you can try to pay, but I doubt that will go over differently.”

“Pretty confident there’s going to be a next time, Malone.”

“Hopeful,” he corrects, his eyes crinkling. “Very hopeful.”

We walk outside, and the cool night air off the bay feels good after the tension of the restaurant. Rowan’s truck is parked at the curb, but my little bungalow is only a few blocks away, and I’d mentioned wanting to walk.

“I’ll walk you home,” he says, falling into step beside me.

The streets of Cedar Bay are quiet at this hour, just the occasional car passing and the distant sound of boats in the harbor. We walk in comfortable silence for a moment, and I’m hyperaware of his hand occasionally brushing against mine.

“So,” I finally say. “Poetry, huh?”

“Don’t tell anyone. It would ruin my manly reputation.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

rowan

I can't stop grinning like an idiot as we walk up the stone path to Cilla's bungalow. The moonlight reflecting off the bay creates this perfect silver glow around her auburn hair, and I'm trying like hell not to stare. But damn, it's impossible.

"I had a really nice time tonight," she says, her voice soft against the sound of waves lapping at the shore across the street.

"Me too," I manage, suddenly feeling like I'm back in high school instead of a thirty-one-year-old man who runs his own construction company. Something about Cilla Griffin turns me into a nervous teenager.

When we reach her door, I can hear her dachshunds going ballistic on the other side. Yapping and scratching like they've been abandoned for days instead of a few hours.

"That would be the welcoming committee," she says with a bit of a half-smile that makes my chest tighten. "I'm sure Birdie and Brody believe I've been kidnapped."

"Very protective," I say, taking a step closer. "I respect that in a dog."

Cilla fumbles slightly with her keys, and I wonder if she's nervous too. The thought gives me courage. I've wanted to kiss her since we set off for dinner, biding my time to feel her lips on mine again.

When she turns to face me, I don't hesitate. I lean down—way down, given our height difference—and press my lips to hers. I meant it to be gentle and respectful, a

goodnight kiss that leaves her wanting more. But then she makes this little sound in the back of her throat, and suddenly, her keys drop to the porch with a clatter, and her hands grip my jacket, pulling me closer.

Holy. Shit. I'm in love.

The dogs are losing their minds now, probably seeing our silhouettes through the frosted glass of her front door. But I couldn't care less as Cilla's mouth opens under mine, her tongue tentatively meeting my own. She tastes like the tiramisu we shared for dessert, sweet, rich, and intoxicating.

"We should..." she murmurs against my lips, then kisses me harder, contradicting whatever she was about to suggest.

"Yeah," I agree to nothing, trailing kisses along her jaw.

Somehow, she manages to retrieve her keys without entirely breaking contact. The door swings open, and we stumble inside as two small black and tan blurs circle our legs, yipping excitedly.

"Hi babies, yes, I'm home," she coos down at them, but her eyes stay locked on mine, pupils dilated in the dim light of her foyer.

I kick the door behind us and pull her back into my arms. The dogs are practically doing laps around us now, but all I can focus on is how perfectly she fits against me, how her body melts into mine as if we've done this a thousand times before.

"The dogs," she whispers between kisses but makes no move to stop.

"They'll survive," I murmur against her neck, inhaling her scent—something citrusy and clean that's driving me insane. My hands slide down to her waist, drawing her

closer.

Birdie—or maybe Brody, I still can't tell them apart—jumps against my leg while the other circles us, urgently barking.

Cilla laughs against my mouth, the vibration sending shivers down my spine. “They think they’re protecting me from you.”

“Smart dogs,” I say, nipping at her lower lip. “I’m definitely dangerous.”

Her blue eyes darken as she looks up at me. “Is that so?”

“Mmm,” I confirm, backing her gently against the wall of her entryway. My hand finds its way into her hair, cradling the back of her head as I deepen the kiss.

The dogs are going absolutely nuts now. One of them tugs at my pant leg while the other barks in what seems like perfectly timed intervals.

Cilla’s hands slide under my jacket, her fingers pressing into my back through my shirt. I want to feel those hands everywhere. I want to stay in this moment forever, with her pressed between me and the wall, her taste on my tongue.

“Rowan,” she breathes, and the sound of my name in that husky voice nearly undoes me.

But then she’s placing her palms against my chest, gently pushing me back. “I think we should slow down.”

It takes my brain a second to catch up, blood rushing back to my head from... elsewhere. “Yeah. Of course.” I step back, immediately missing her warmth.

She bends down to scoop up one of the dachshunds, who immediately licks her face while eyeing me suspiciously. “It’s not that I don’t want to,” she says, her cheeks flushed in a way that makes me want to kiss her again. “It’s just...”

“Too fast,” I finish for her. “I get it. Believe me, I respect that.”

And I do. Even if my body is currently staging a full-scale rebellion against the concept of “slowing down.”

“Thank you,” she says, smiling that half-smile again. “For dinner. And for being... you.”

I run a hand through my hair, trying to collect myself. “Does this mean there might be a second date in my future?”

Cilla bites her lower lip, which does nothing to help my current state. “I’d like that,” she says, adjusting the dachshund in her arms. The other one has finally stopped barking but remains firmly planted between us, guardian of virtue.

“Great. That’s... great.” Eloquent, Rowan. Real smooth.

She laughs a genuine sound that makes her eyes crinkle at the corners. “You’re cute when you’re flustered.”

“I’m not flustered,” I lie, absolutely flustered. “I’m... contemplative.”

“Is that what we’re calling it?” She raises an eyebrow, and I swear I’ve never wanted anyone more than I want this tiny, brilliant woman with her judgmental dogs and smart mouth.

I take another step back, knowing if I don’t put some distance between us, I’ll be

kissing her again in seconds. “For the record, Dr. Griffin, you’re the first woman who’s made me ‘contemplative’ in a long time.”

She blushes at that, the pink in her cheeks visible even in the dim light of her foyer. The dog in her arms yawns dramatically, apparently deciding I’m no longer an immediate threat.

“I should go,” I say, though every cell in my body disagrees. “Let you get these two to bed.”

“Probably for the best,” she agrees, but there’s a reluctance in her voice that gives me hope. “Birdie and Brody get cranky without their beauty sleep.”

“We wouldn’t want that.” I reach out to scratch the head of the dog still on the floor—Brody, I think—who accepts my offering with suspicious tolerance. “I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“I’d like that,” she repeats, and the sincerity in her voice makes my chest warm.

I lean in for one more kiss, keeping it brief despite every instinct telling me to deepen it. When I pull back, Cilla’s eyes stay closed for a moment longer, and I file away that image for later.

“Goodnight, Cilla,” I say, opening the door behind me.

“Goodnight, Rowan.” She shifts the dog in her arms, “Drive safe.”

The walk back to my house feels ten times longer than the walk up to her door. I glance back once to see her silhouette in the doorway, both dogs at her feet, watching me go. She raises a hand in a small wave, and I return it, feeling ridiculously happy about such a simple gesture.

I've been with beautiful women before, smart women, and funny women, but never someone who hits all three with the force of a hurricane like Cilla Griffin.

I'm in trouble. The good kind of trouble that makes your heart race like you're a teenager again.

On the short walk home, I can't stop replaying every moment of tonight in my head. The way she laughed at my stupid jokes at dinner. The way she leaned in when I told her about the summer I spent rebuilding that fishing boat with my dad. The feeling of her lips against mine, soft but insistent.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes, and I half expect it to be Cilla, but it's not. It's Fox.

Fox: Job tomorrow still on? Tobias wants to know what time.

Right. Work. The real world. The one where I'm not just a lovesick fool mooning over the most brilliant, sexiest professor in Cedar Bay.

Me: 8am sharp

As I climb my porch steps, I notice Mrs. Hendricks' porch light is still on next door. She's probably up watching her crime shows again. The old woman misses nothing in this neighborhood, so she saw me leave for my date tonight. I'll definitely be dodging her questions tomorrow morning.

Everything feels too quiet inside my house after the chaos of Cilla's dogs and the electricity between us. I grab a beer from the fridge, drop onto my couch, and kick off my boots.

It's been a long time since I've felt this way about anyone. Hell, maybe I've never felt exactly this way before. The women I usually date are... simpler. Not less

intelligent, but less challenging. They don't make me work for it. They don't have tiny guard dogs, dissertations, or walls built around their hearts that I'm desperate to scale.

I take a long pull of my beer and grab the remote, but I don't turn on the TV. Instead, I stare at the built-in bookshelves I installed last winter. I never mention the ones lined with the books to the guys at the job sites. Fitzgerald. Hemingway. A worn copy of "The Count of Monte Cristo" my grandfather gave me before he died.

What would Cilla think of my little library? If she'd be surprised. If she'd run those slender fingers along the spines, pull one out, curl up on my couch, and read while I examine the blueprints for our next project.

"Jesus, Malone," I mutter to myself. "She's got you wrapped around her finger. "

But I can't help it. There's something about Cilla that feels... right. Like I've been waiting for her to move into that little bungalow by the bay my whole life without even knowing it.

I pull out my phone, thumb hovering over her contact. Too soon to text? Probably. Definitely. But I want to. I want to tell her I'm still tasting her on my lips. That her dogs are cute, even if they clearly hate me. That I'm already counting the minutes until I can see her again.

I set the phone down without texting. Play it cool, Rowan. Don't scare her off.

But as I head to the bedroom, I can't stop replaying the feeling of her pressed against me in that tiny foyer, the soft sounds she made when I kissed her neck, and the reluctance in her eyes when she put on the brakes.

I've built an entire business from the ground up, served in war zones, and faced down

angry clients who wanted to change plans mid-construction, but nothing has ever made my heart pound like Priscilla Griffin and her two judgmental dachshunds.

I strip down to my boxers and fall into bed, staring at the ceiling fan, turning lazy circles above me. Tomorrow, I'll return to being Rowan Malone, owner of Cedar Bay Construction. I'll wear my hard hat, give orders, and pretend I'm not counting the hours until I can call her.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I nearly fall out of bed, reaching for it.

Cilla: I just wanted to say goodnight again. And that Birdie and Brody might eventually forgive you for the kissing incident. Maybe. With sufficient bribery. - C

I read it three times, smiling like a fool, before typing back.

Me: I'll bring dog treats on our second date. Fair warning: I plan to give them a reason to be scandalized again.

The three dots appear immediately, and my stomach does this weird flip thing I haven't felt since high school.

Cilla: Looking forward to it. Goodnight, Rowan.

I fall asleep with my phone still in my hand, dreams full of auburn hair and moonlight on the bay.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

rowan

I arrive at the job site before anyone else, checking the lumber delivery and reviewing the plans for the Marshall addition. We're adding a sunroom facing the water; the windows arrived yesterday. I'm marking measurements when Fox's truck pulls in.

"Someone's chipper this morning," he says as he climbs out, travel mug in hand. "Date went well?"

I try to wipe the smile off my face but fail miserably. "It was good."

"Good?" Fox raises an eyebrow, grabbing his tool belt from the truck bed. "You're practically floating, and all I get is 'good'?"

I shrug, but I can feel the grin breaking through again. "Fine. It was great. Cilla's... refreshing."

"Different how?" Fox asks, eyeing me suspiciously. "Because the last time you said a woman was 'different,' it was Amber, and she turned out to be exactly like every other wingman who's thrown herself at you since tenth grade."

"Cilla's not throwing herself at me," I say, frowning. "If anything, she's making me work for it. And I don't mind." I pause, surprised by my own admission. "Actually, I like it."

Fox stops mid-sip of coffee, staring at me like I've just announced I'm moving to Mars. "Rowan Malone likes the chase? Since when?"

“It’s not about the chase,” I say, realizing it’s true as I say it. “It’s about her. She’s smart—like, brilliant. She’s working on her PhD and teaches history at St. Agnes. And she’s funny, but in this dry way where half the time I’m not sure if she’s joking until I see that little smile.”

“Sounds like someone’s smitten,” Cole says, appearing from behind his truck with a knowing grin. “Our boy’s finally met his match.”

“I’m not smitten,” I protest, though the heat creeping up my neck betrays me. “I just had a good time.”

“Uh-huh,” Fox says, unconvinced. “And that’s why you were here an hour early, whistling while you measure.”

Was I whistling? Shit.

“Whatever,” I grumble, turning back to the plans. “Don’t we have work to do?”

“Sure thing, Romeo,” Cole laughs, clapping me on the shoulder. “But fair warning—if this girl’s got you acting like this after one date, we’ll never let you live it down.”

I roll my eyes but can’t muster any real annoyance. They’re not wrong. One dinner, one kiss—okay, several kisses—and I’m already in deeper than I’ve been with anyone in years. Maybe ever.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I have to physically restrain myself from yanking it out immediately. I wait until Fox and Cole are busy unloading supplies before checking it.

Cilla: Good morning. The boys and I are heading to the beach for our morning walk.

There's a coffee shop nearby that makes excellent lattes. Just saying.

It's not an invitation. Not exactly. But it feels like one.

I glance at my watch. We have the framing to finish today, and I should supervise. But...

"Hey," I call out to Fox. "I need to make a quick run. Can you handle things for an hour?"

Fox narrows his eyes, but there's a hint of amusement there. "Are you meeting Cilla?"

"How did you?—"

"Because you've got a dumb smile on your face." He waves me off. "Go. But you owe me."

I'm already backing toward my truck. "You're the best, man."

"And don't you forget it," he calls after me.

As I drive toward the beach, I try to tell myself this is casual. Just coffee. But there's nothing casual about the way my heart is hammering against my ribs or how I check my hair in the rearview mirror before getting out of the truck.

I spot them right away. It's hard to miss an auburn-haired beauty being pulled along by two enthusiastic dachshunds on the otherwise quiet morning beach. The dogs are racing ahead of Cilla, leashes taut as they investigate every interesting scent in the sand. Cilla's laugh carries on the breeze as one of them—Birdie, I think—darts sideways to chase a seagull.

She hasn't seen me yet. For a moment, I just watch her, noticing how the early sunlight catches in her hair and how her face lights up when she calls to her dogs. She's wearing jeans rolled up at the ankles, sand clinging to her bare feet, and a blue sweater that matches her eyes. No makeup, hair pulled back in a messy bun—completely different from the polished professor who sat across from me at dinner last night. Somehow, she's even more beautiful this way.

Then, one of the dogs spots me. Brody's ears perk up, and he lets out a series of sharp barks that have Cilla turning to follow his gaze. When she sees me, she freezes for just a second, then breaks into a smile that hits me like a physical force.

"Fancy meeting you here," I call out, walking toward her.

"What a coincidence," she says, eyes sparkling with mischief. "And here I thought I was being subtle with my text."

"About as subtle as your guard dogs," I reply, nodding toward the dachshunds who are now circling my legs, still barking.

"Birdie, Brody, enough," she says firmly. They quiet down but continue to eye me with suspicion. "They're still deciding if you're a threat or not."

"And what's the verdict so far?" I ask, reaching down slowly to let them sniff my hand.

"The jury's still out," she says, but there's a warmth in her voice that wasn't there the first few times we spoke. "But they're accepting bribes in the form of bacon treats if you're wondering."

"Noted for future reference." I straighten up, suddenly very aware of how close we're standing. "So, I hear there's excellent coffee nearby?"

“There is.” She winds the dogs’ leashes around her hand. “Though I should warn you, the owner is the biggest gossip in Cedar Bay. So if you’re seen with me, the whole town will know by lunchtime.”

“Let them talk,” I say, feeling bolder than usual. “I’m not exactly hiding my interest here, Cilla.”

A blush creeps up her neck, but she doesn’t look away. “Fair enough. Though I should warn you, I won’t provide anything interesting to gossip about. I spend most of my time grading papers and working on my dissertation. Not exactly scandalous material.”

“I don’t know,” I say, falling into step beside her as we walk toward the coffee shop. “Smart is the new sexy for me.” The words slip out before I can stop them, and I can feel the tips of my ears getting hot.

Cilla looks up at me, a mix of surprise and something else—something I very much want to explore—in her eyes. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely,” I reply, holding her gaze. “Watching you talk about the Louis and Clark expedition at dinner last night? When your eyes lit up and you used your hands to show their path through the Rocky Mountains? Sexiest thing I’ve seen in years.”

She laughs, but it’s different from her usual laugh—lower, almost shy. “Most men don’t find my academic rants particularly appealing.”

“Most men are idiots,” I say simply.

The dogs have calmed down now, trotting alongside us as we reach the boardwalk. I think one of them—Brody— bumps against my leg in what feels almost like acceptance.

“Progress,” Cilla notes, nodding toward the dog. “He only does that with people he’s decided aren’t serial killers.”

“High praise,” I say, smiling down at the little dachshund. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, buddy.”

The coffee shop is a small place tucked between a souvenir store and a bait shop. It has a faded blue awning and mismatched outdoor furniture. As soon as we walk in, a plump woman with silver hair spots us, and her eyes widen with obvious delight.

“Professor Griffin! And Rowan Malone! Well, isn’t this a surprise?” She bustles over, wiping her hands on her apron. “What brings you two in together this fine morning?”

“Coffee, Mrs. Winters,” Cilla says smoothly. “I’ve been telling Rowan about your lattes.”

“Of course, of course,” Mrs. Winters says, her eyes darting between us. “The usual for you, dear? And for you, Rowan?”

“Black coffee is fine,” I say.

Mrs. Winters tuts. “Nonsense. A big, strong man like you needs something substantial. I’ll make you my special—espresso with a touch of cinnamon and honey.”

Before I can protest, she’s off behind the counter, humming to herself.

“Told you,” Cilla murmurs, leading me to a table by the window. “Town gossip central.”

“I don’t mind,” I say, meaning it. I pull out Cilla’s chair, an automatic gesture that earns me a raised eyebrow.

“Chivalry?” she asks but sits down anyway, arranging the dogs’ leashes so they can lie comfortably beside her chair.

“Force of habit,” I explain, taking the seat across from her. “My mom would skin me alive if she heard I didn’t pull out a chair for a date.”

“Is this a date?” Cilla asks, her head tilted slightly. “I thought our first date was last night.”

“This is...” I search for the right words, distracted by the way the morning light catches in her hair. “Let’s call it date one-point-five. An unscheduled bonus round.”

She laughs, and the sound does something to my chest that I can’t quite explain. “I like that. Very precise categorization.”

“I try,” I say, leaning forward slightly. “Though to be completely honest, I’d categorize any time spent with you as a win.”

Her cheeks flush, but she holds my gaze. “Smooth talker.”

“Only with you,” I admit. “Usually I’m much better at this whole flirting thing. You make me nervous.”

“I make you nervous?” She looks genuinely surprised. “That’s... unexpected.”

“Why? Because you’re barely over five feet tall, I could probably bench press you?”

She rolls her eyes, but a smile plays at her lips. “Something like that. Plus, you have a

reputation in this town, Rowan Malone.”

“Do I now?” I lean back in my chair, curious. “And what reputation is that?”

“Cedar Bay’s most eligible bachelor,” she says, making air quotes. “Mrs. Winters told me all about you the first time I came in for coffee. How you built half the new houses in town with your bare hands. How you’ve broken hearts from here to Seattle.”

I wince. “That’s... exaggerated.”

“Is it?” She raises an eyebrow, but there’s no judgment in her expression, just curiosity.

“The construction part, no. That’s actually accurate. The heart-breaking...” I shrug. “I’ve dated, sure. But I’ve never made promises I couldn’t keep.”

Mrs. Winters chooses that moment to arrive with our drinks, setting them down with a flourish. “One lavender latte for the professor and my special for the handsome contractor. Can I get you two anything else? Some of my blueberry scones, perhaps? Fresh out of the oven.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Cilla says before I can respond. “Two, please.”

As Mrs. Winters bustles away, clearly delighted by this development, Cilla leans forward. “She makes the best scones in the county. Trust me.”

“I do,” I say simply.

Something shifts in her expression, a softening around her eyes. “You barely know me.”

“I know enough,” I reply, surprising myself with the certainty I feel. “I know you’re brilliant. I know you’re kind—you greeted Mrs. Winters by name the first time you came here, which means you pay attention to people. I know you love those two judgmental little dogs like your children.” I pause, taking a sip of my coffee, which is actually delicious. “And I know that when you smile—really smile, not that polite one you give your students—it’s like someone turned on all the lights in the room.”

Cilla stares at me, lips parted slightly, something unreadable in her expression. For a moment, I worry I’ve said too much and been too honest too quickly. Then she reaches across the table and rests her fingertips lightly on my hand.

“You’re not what I expected,” she says softly.

“Is that good or bad?”

“I’m still deciding.” But there’s a warmth in her eyes that gives me hope.

Mrs. Winters returns with the scones, giving our almost-touching hands a delighted glance before retreating to help another customer. When I take a bite, the scones are still warm, and the blueberries are bursting with flavor.

“Told you,” Cilla says, watching my reaction with satisfaction.

“You were right.” I brush a crumb from my lip. “I’ll never doubt your food recommendations again.”

We fall into easy conversation after that. Cilla tells me more about her dissertation—something about women’s roles in Pacific Northwest logging communities that actually sounds fascinating the way she describes it. I tell her about the sunroom we’re building for the Marshalls and how I designed it to maximize the view of the bay while maintaining the historical character of their Victorian home.

Time slips away. I realize immediately that I've been away from the job site for almost two hours when my phone buzzes with a text.

Fox: Bossman, lumber's here. Need your approval before we start cutting.

I sigh, showing Cilla the text. "Duty calls."

"I should get back to work too," she says, gathering the dogs' leashes. "I have papers to grade before my afternoon class."

I leave enough cash on the table to cover our drinks, scones, and a generous tip, waving away Cilla's protest. "Date one-point-five, remember? My treat."

Outside, the morning has warmed considerably. Cilla slips on a pair of sunglasses, and I have to resist the urge to tell her how adorable she looks with those oversized frames on her delicate face.

"This was nice. Unexpected but nice. Thanks for meeting me."

"I'm full of surprises," I say, stepping closer. "You should keep me around to see what other unexpected things happen."

She laughs, but it catches slightly in her throat as I move into her space. "Is that your sales pitch?"

"Is it working?" I ask, my voice dropping lower.

Her eyes flick to my mouth, then back up. "Maybe."

One of the dogs—Birdie—lets out a short, sharp bark, as if reminding us they're still here. Cilla jumps slightly, breaking the moment.

“I should really get going,” she says, fumbling with the leashes. “And you have a lumber delivery to approve.”

“Right,” I say, reluctantly stepping back. “But I want to see you again. Soon.”

She opens the back door, helping the dogs jump in. “I’m busy tonight. I have lots of papers to grade.”

“Tomorrow?” I press. “Dinner? Or lunch, if that works better with your schedule.”

She hesitates, then looks up at me with those clear blue eyes. “Dinner would be good. But I’m cooking this time. My place, 7 o’clock?”

My heart makes a ridiculous little leap. “Your place? Are you sure?”

“Don’t read too much into it,” she warns, but there’s a teasing grin playing at her lips. “It’s just that I have this recipe I’ve been wanting to try, and eating alone is depressing.”

“I’ll bring wine,” I offer. “Red or white?”

“Surprise me,” she says, sliding into the driver’s seat. “You seem good at that.”

cilla

I stand over my kitchen island, maniacally chopping capers for the chicken piccata and wondering for the millionth time if inviting Rowan Malone to my house for dinner counts as encouragement. Because I shouldn't be encouraging him. I should be discouraging him with extreme prejudice.

“What do you think, guys?” I ask Birdie and Brody, who are sitting at attention by my feet, their little dachshund bodies vibrating with the promise of dropped food. “Am I making a huge mistake?”

Brody tilts his head. Birdie whines.

“Yeah, that's what I thought too.”

The truth is, after our coffee date last week—which I'd only agreed to because he'd fixed my porch steps for free—I've been having a hard time remembering all the reasons why dating is a terrible idea right now. Especially when dating someone like Rowan, who practically has “HEARTbrEAKER” tattooed across his absurdly perfect chest.

The doorbell rings, and both dogs erupt into frenzied barking.

“Oh, fudge,” I murmur, wiping my hands on a dish towel. “He's early.”

I smooth down my dress—nothing fancy, just a simple blue wrap dress that happens to match my eyes—and take a deep breath. “Be cool, Priscilla. He's just a man. An

unreasonably attractive man who looks at you like you're the last slice of pizza after a marathon."

When I open the door, Rowan is standing there with a bottle of wine and a bouquet of wildflowers, looking like he stepped out of some small-town romance novel with his perfectly fitted jeans and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to showcase forearms that should be illegal.

"Hi," he says, and I swear his voice drops an octave. "You look beautiful."

I'm about to respond when Birdie and Brody dart between my legs, launching themselves at Rowan like heat-seeking missiles.

"Whoa there!" He laughs, crouching down to let them sniff his hands. "Hello to you, too."

"Sorry," I say, trying to corral my traitorous dogs. "They usually don't like strangers."

"I'm not a stranger anymore, am I?" He looks up at me with those hazel eyes, and something warm unfurls in my chest.

"The jury's still out," I reply, smiling as I say it.

Dinner goes surprisingly well. Rowan compliments my cooking approximately seventeen times, asks thoughtful questions about my dissertation, and somehow manages to slip chicken to my dogs without me catching him in the act.

"I saw that," I say after the third time.

"Saw what?" His innocent expression is undermined by Brody's enthusiastic licking

of his fingers under the table.

“You’re creating monsters.”

“They were monsters before I got here,” he says with a grin that makes my stomach do a weird little flip. “I’m just enabling them.”

It’s dangerous how comfortable this feels. Sitting across from Rowan at my little dining table, the bay visible through the windows, conversation flowing easily between bites of chicken and sips of wine. I catch myself staring at his hands more than once—strong, capable hands that built things that could probably build and break a woman if given half a chance.

“Earth to Cilla,” he says, and I realize I’ve missed whatever he just said.

“Sorry,” I mumble, heat rising to my cheeks. “I was thinking about my dissertation.”

“Liar.” His eyes twinkle with mischief. “But I’ll let it slide if you tell me what you’re really thinking about.”

I take a long sip of wine. “I was thinking that this is nice. And that scares me a little.”

Something shifts in his expression—surprise, followed by a softness I haven’t seen before. “Why does nice scare you?”

“Because nice things don’t last,” I say before I can stop myself. “Especially nice things with men who look like you.”

“Men who look like me?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, come on.” I wave my fork at him. “You know exactly what you look like. The

whole town practically swoons when you walk down the street.”

“I’m only interested in one woman’s swooning,” he says quietly.

After dinner, we move to the couch with our wine. The dogs immediately claim Rowan’s lap, the little traitors, and he absently strokes their backs while we talk about his latest restoration project—a historic boathouse on the north side of the bay.

I don’t know if it’s the wine or the way the setting sun casts golden light across his features, but I find myself leaning closer, my defenses lowering with each passing minute.

“Can I ask you something?” he says.

“Depends on the question.”

“Why have you been avoiding me since you moved in? And don’t say you haven’t because we both know that’s not true.”

I sigh, setting my wine glass on the coffee table. “Because you’re distracting. And I don’t need distractions right now.”

“Is that all I am? A distraction?” There’s a hint of hurt in his voice.

“No,” I admit. “You’re worse. You’re... tempting.”

His eyes darken. “Tempting how?”

Instead of answering, I reach over and gently relocate my dogs to the floor. Then, I slide closer until our thighs touch.

“Like this,” I whisper, and then I’m kissing him.

His response is immediate, one hand cupping my face while the other slides around my waist, pulling me closer. He tastes like wine and possibility, and I find myself making a small sound in the back of my throat when his tongue brushes against mine.

Before I know it, I’m straddling his lap, my dress riding up my thighs as his hands explore my back, my waist, the curve of my hips. Every touch sends electric currents through my body. I can feel him hardening beneath me, and I roll my hips experimentally, drawing a groan from deep in his chest.

“Cilla,” he breathes against my neck, placing hot, open-mouthed kisses along my collarbone. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“Good,” I murmur, tangling my fingers in his hair. “Now you know how I feel.”

He pulls back slightly, his eyes searching mine. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’m losing my mind every time you’re around,” I admit, feeling vulnerable and reckless all at once. “Like I can’t think straight.”

His smile is slow and devastating. “I thought you were immune to my charms.”

“I was faking it,” I say, and then his mouth is on mine again, hungrier this time, more urgent.

I rock against him, the friction creating delicious pressure exactly where I need it. His hands slide under my dress, fingertips tracing patterns on my bare thighs that make me shiver. When his thumb brushes the edge of my underwear, I gasp.

“Is this okay?” he asks, his voice rough.

“More than okay,” I manage to say, surprising myself with how breathless I sound.

We move against each other, and a rhythm builds between us that has me forgetting why this is a bad idea. Rowan’s jeans are rough against my inner thighs, but the sensation only adds to the building tension. I can feel myself getting close, embarrassingly close, just from this.. “

“Rowan,”—” I break off as he shifts, angling his hips to press against me just right, and suddenly, I’m trembling, waves of pleasure washing over me as I bury my face in his neck to muffle my cry. “

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispers, holding me tight as I come down, my body still quivering with aftershocks.

Reality crashes back in as I realize what just happened. I just dry-humped Rowan Malone like a teenager and came on my couch. And he didn’t even?—

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out, mortification heating my cheeks. “That was—I didn’t mean to?—”

“Hey.” He tilts my chin up, forcing me to meet his eyes. “Don’t you dare apologize for it. That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I bite my lip. “But you didn’t...”

“Trust me,” he says with a wry smile, shifting slightly beneath me. “I’m thrilled knowing I can affect you like that.”

A bark from the floor reminds me we’re not alone. I glance down to see Birdie and Brody staring up at us, both with their heads tilted in confusion. The mood breaks, and I burst into laughter.

“Oh my god, I forgot they were watching,” I say, burying my face in Rowan’s shoulder. “I feel like a terrible dog mom.”

Rowan chuckles, the sound rumbling through his chest against mine. “I’m pretty sure they’re just upset we stopped paying attention to them.”

As if on cue, Brody lets out a pitiful whine and puts his paws up on the edge of the couch.

“See?” Rowan says, reaching down to scratch behind Brody’s ears. “Attention hogs.”

I slide off his lap, adjusting my dress and trying to regain some semblance of dignity. “I should probably take them out.”

“I’ll come with you,” he offers, standing up and discreetly adjusting himself.

The cool evening air helps clear my head as we walk the dogs along the shoreline path near my house. Rowan holds both leashes while I wrap my cardigan tighter around myself, watching the moonlight dance on the bay.

“So,” he says after a comfortable silence, “was this a one-time thing, or can I hope for a third date?”

I glance at him sideways. “You’re counting this as our second date?”

“Dinner at your place? Absolutely a date.” He bumps his shoulder against mine. “A pretty successful one, I’d say.”

I snort. “Is that your metric for success? Making women come in their living rooms?”

“Only the women I’m crazy about,” he says, and the sincerity in his voice makes my

heart skip.

“I should be focusing on my dissertation,” I say, but there’s no conviction in my voice.

“You can focus on your dissertation and still have dinner with me again.” He stops walking, turning to face me. “Look, Cilla, I know you’ve got this idea that I’m some kind of player?—”

“The entire female population of Cedar Bay seems to think so.”

“The entire female population of Cedar Bay doesn’t know me,” he counters. “Not really.”

I study his face in the moonlight, searching for signs of insincerity and finding none. “And you think I could?”

“Yes, I know you could.” He hands me back the leashes and takes my free hand in his. “I’ll be here on Friday, Priscilla Griffin. Be ready at 7.” He brings my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles. “I won’t take no for an answer.”

I can’t help but smile. “I had no intention of uttering the word.”

cilla

I stare at the half-eaten tuna sandwich on my plate when my sister, Prue, clears her throat for the fifteenth time in five minutes. My sister has never been subtle about wanting information.

"So, are we going to talk about the hot construction guy you've been avoiding for three months, or are we just going to pretend I didn't see you practically drooling when his truck drove by earlier?" She arches one perfectly groomed eyebrow at me.

"I wasn't drooling," I mutter, picking at the crust of my bread. "And I'm not avoiding Rowan. I'm just... maintaining professional boundaries."

Prue snorts. "Professional? Is he one of your students? Does he attend faculty meetings?"

"No, but?—"

"Then cut the crap, Cilla." She reaches across my tiny kitchen table and steals one of my chips. "You've mentioned him in every phone call for weeks. 'Rowan fixed Mrs. Henderson's porch.' 'Rowan waved at me this morning.' 'Rowan helped me carry Birdie to the vet when she ate that chocolate.'"

I feel heat crawling up my neck. "Oh, for fudge's sake."

"Exactly." Prue grins triumphantly. "You like him."

Birdie and Brody choose this moment to start barking at the back door, probably spotting a squirrel in the yard. I welcome the distraction, but Prue isn't having it.

"Don't even think about it," she warns. "Spill."

I sigh, letting my head fall back. "Fine. Yes. I like him. I like Rowan Malone with his ridiculous shoulders, stupid perfect smile, and the way he always asks about my dissertation even though the Oregon Trail can't possibly interest him."

"And you're dragging your because...?"

"Because I've been down this road before!" I throw my hands up. "Hot guy who thinks it's cute that I'm smart until it's not cute anymore. Until he feels threatened or bored or whatever. I don't have time for that, Prue. I have classes to teach and a dissertation to finish and?—"

"And a life to live," Prue interrupts softly. "Not every guy is Daniel, you know."

I wince at the mention of my ex. "I know that. Intellectually."

"But emotionally, you're still hiding." She reaches for my hand. "Look, I'm not saying marry the guy. But maybe stop pretending you don't notice when he brings you coffee on his way to work."

"He does have great timing with the coffee," I admit.

"I want to meet him," Prue announces suddenly.

"What? No. Absolutely not."

"I'm in town for twenty-four more hours before returning to Seattle. As your big

sister, it's my sacred duty to vet potential boyfriends. It's in the older sister handbook."

"He's not my boyfriend," I protest weakly.

"Yet," Prue winks.

I groan and bury my face in my hands. "You're impossible."

"I'm thorough," she corrects. "And if Rowan's as amazing as you've been pretending not to notice, he'll pass my inspection with flying colors."

The dogs have settled down now, curling together in their bed by the window. I envy their uncomplicated existence: Eat, sleep, bark at squirrels, repeat—no romantic confusion whatsoever.

"Fine," I concede, knowing resistance is futile. "We can drive by the site where Rowan's working today. But just a quick hello. No interrogation, embarrassing childhood stories, and no mention of the time I stalked his Instagram at 2 AM."

Prue's eyes widen with delight. "You stalked his?—"

"It was research!" I defend. "Purely academic interest in his... construction techniques."

"Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" She smirks.

An hour later, I regret my decision as we approach the renovation site where Cedar Bay Construction is turning an old boathouse into a waterfront café. My palms are sweating on the steering wheel.

"This is stupid," I mutter. "Rowan's probably not even here."

But of course, the universe hates me because there he is—Rowan Malone in all his glory, shirtless in the summer heat, directing his crew while holding what looks like architectural plans. The sun glints off his tanned skin, and I momentarily forget how to breathe.

"Holy shit," Prue whispers beside me. "You undersold him. Dramatically."

"I know," I groan. "Can we go now?"

"Absolutely not." She's already unbuckling her seatbelt. "We're getting out of this car, and you're going to act like a functional human being around a man you like."

Before I can protest further, she's out of the car and waving. "Hello! Are you Rowan?"

I contemplate driving away and leaving her here, but that would be a terrible sister move, even for me. Instead, I reluctantly exit the car, trying to look casual and probably failing miserably.

Rowan looks up, confusion crossing his features before his eyes land on me. Then his whole face transforms with that smile—the one that makes my stomach do Olympic-level gymnastics.

"Cilla," he says, jogging over. "This is a surprise."

"A good one, I hope," Prue interjects, extending her hand. "I'm Prudence Griffin, the superior sister. You can call me Prue."

"Superior is debatable," I mutter.

Rowan laughs, and the sound warms something inside me. I've been trying desperately to keep cold.

"It's definitely a good surprise," he says, wiping his hands on his jeans before shaking Prue's hand. "Rowan Malone. Nice to finally meet some of Cilla's family."

"Finally, is right," Prue says with a pointed look my way. "I've heard so much about you."

I shoot her a death glare. "No, she hasn't."

"Oh, I've pieced things together from what she doesn't say," Prue continues, ignoring me altogether. "My sister has developed an interesting habit of trailing off mid-sentence whenever your name comes up."

"Is that so?" Rowan's eyes find mine, amusement dancing in them.

"I'm going to murder you," I whisper to Prue.

"What's that, sis? Couldn't hear you." She grins innocently.

I'm about to come up with some excuse about needing to get back to work on my dissertation when a tall, lean man with dark hair approaches. Something about the way he walks radiates confidence.

"Ro, we need your input on the—" He stops abruptly, his eyes landing on Prue.

"Fox, this is Cilla's sister, Prue," Rowan introduces. "And you know Cilla."

"Hi," Fox says to me absently before his attention snaps back to my sister. "Prue. That's short for...?"

"Prudence," she answers, and I notice she's tucking her hair behind her ear—her nervous tell. "Though there's nothing prudent about me."

"I can see that," Fox says with a slow smile that makes me want to step between them.

"Fox is one of my business partners," Rowan explains, moving closer as our siblings continue their mutual appraisal. "He handles most of our client relations."

"I bet he does," I murmur, watching Fox charm my usually unflappable sister.

Rowan chuckles, lowering his voice. "Should we be concerned?"

The "we" sends an unexpected thrill through me. Like we're a unit. A team.

"Probably," I admit. "Prue doesn't do relationships. She does... expeditions."

"Fox is the same way," Rowan says. "Never met a woman he couldn't charm, never stayed with one long enough to try."

"Great. Fox and Prue are perfect for each other."

"Or a disaster waiting to happen."

We share a look that feels like we're in on a secret together, and I realize with a start that this is the longest conversation we've had without me making an excuse to leave. It's... nice.

"So, what brings you by?" Rowan asks, and something hopeful in his voice makes my heart skip.

"Prue wanted to meet—" I stop mid-sentence and take a deep breath. "Prue wanted to see the town while she's visiting. And I guess I wanted to... say hi."

"Hi," he says, his voice dropping an octave, sending a shiver through me despite the summer heat.

"Hi," I whisper back.

From the corner of my eye, I see Prue and Fox have somehow migrated several feet away, deep in conversation. Fox says something that makes my sister throw her head back in genuine laughter, a rare sight these days.

"So your sister's just visiting?" Rowan asks, pulling my attention back to him.

"Just for the weekend. Prue lives in Seattle and works for some tech startup... actually, I'm not entirely sure what she does. Something with algorithms and user experience that she tries to explain but always loses me halfway through."

"And you're the academic in the family."

"The boring one, according to most family gatherings," I admit.

"I don't find you boring at all," he says, holding my gaze a beat longer than necessary.

I feel myself blushing and hate it. "Well, you haven't heard me go on about 19th-century Pacific Northwest settlement patterns yet."

"I'd like to."

There's an earnestness in his voice that catches me off guard. Before I can respond, there's a crash from somewhere in the building, followed by cursing.

"Boss!" someone yells. "We've got a situation with the support beam!"

Rowan winces. "Duty calls. But..." He hesitates, then plunges forward. "Would you and your sister want to join Fox and me for dinner tonight? Nothing fancy, just the Dockside Grill."

My heart does a little leap. "I?—"

"We'd love to," Prue cuts in, suddenly materializing beside me with Fox in tow. "Seven o'clock work for everyone?"

I shoot her an exasperated look, but she just smiles innocently.

"Seven's perfect," Fox says, his eyes never leaving my sister's face.

"Great," Rowan says, looking pleased and slightly relieved. "I'll see you both then." He squeezes my arm lightly before jogging back to deal with whatever construction crisis has erupted.

I stand there, my skin tingling where his fingers touched.

"Earth to Cilla," Prue sings, waving her hand before my face. "Wow, you've got it bad."

"Shut up," I mutter, turning back toward the car. "And what was that with Fox? You're leaving tomorrow."

Prue slides into the passenger seat with a casual shrug that doesn't fool me for a second. "It's dinner, not a marriage proposal. Besides, I'm allowed to appreciate the local scenery."

"He looked at you like you were a five-course meal."

"Good." She grins wickedly. "I'm starving."

I start the car, shaking my head. "You're hopeless."

“And you're falling in love.”

rowan

I've been staring at her for the past ten minutes.

It's ridiculous, really. Me, Rowan Malone—the guy who's never been at a loss for words with a woman—sitting here like some tongue-tied teenager while Fox, of all people, is making Cilla's sister laugh so hard she's practically spitting out her wine.

"So then I told the client, 'Ma'am, that's not a load-bearing wall. That's your refrigerator,'" Fox says, delivering the punchline with his rare grin.

Prue throws her head back, laughing while I take another swig of my beer, trying to look anywhere but at Cilla. Yet my eyes keep drifting back to her like she's magnetic north, and I'm a damn compass.

The Dockside Grill is packed tonight, the usual Friday crowd spilling onto the deck overlooking the bay. String lights twinkle overhead, and somewhere behind us, someone's playing acoustic guitar. It should be perfect—romantic even—but I'm blowing it.

"Your construction stories are way better than Rowan's," Cilla says, those blue eyes finally landing on me. "He mostly talks about how he saved some historic molding or something."

I nearly choke on my IPA. "I do not talk about molding."

"You talked about crown molding for twenty minutes when you saw me walking the

dogs last week.” Her lips quirk up at one corner, and suddenly, I can breathe again.

"That was different. That was the Peterson house. That molding is from 1892."

Fox kicks me under the table. "Jesus, man, you're proving her point."

Cilla's smile widens, and something in my chest loosens. "I thought it was interesting, actually. My dissertation focuses on Pacific Northwest settlement patterns, so I appreciate architectural history."

"See?" I tell Fox before turning back to her. "How's the dissertation coming?"

"Slowly. Teaching three classes while trying to write is..." She makes a face that is adorable and completely relatable.

"I can imagine. My mom was an English teacher. She'd bring home stacks of papers to grade every weekend."

"Your mom's a teacher? Why haven't you told me that before?" Something in her expression shifts and softens.

"Retired now. Dad too—he was the high school shop teacher for thirty years."

"That's where Rowan got his start," Fox chimes in. "Building birdhouses in Mr. Malone's class."

"They were excellent birdhouses," I defend myself.

“Do they still live in town?” Cilla says so quietly I almost miss it.

My heart skips a beat. “My parents retired two towns over—in Maplewood. And

they'd love to meet you, too. They're always asking when I'll bring someone special around."

The moment the words leave my mouth, I want to take them back. The table falls silent. Cilla's cheeks flush pink, and I can't tell if it's embarrassment or something else.

"Someone special, huh?" Prue raises an eyebrow, looking between us with barely concealed amusement.

Cilla takes a long sip of her wine. "My parents live in San Francisco."

"Both professors, right?" I remember this detail from one of our awkward conversations over her fence when I was pretending to check the property line, but I really just wanted an excuse to talk to her.

She nods. "Dad's in Philosophy, Mom's in Literature. They're... intense."

"They're terrifying," Prue corrects, then turns to Fox. "My father once made my prom date discuss Socrates for an hour before we could leave."

Fox looks genuinely intrigued rather than horrified. "I could brush up on my philosophy."

I can't help but notice how Fox leans toward Prue, his usual scowl nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, I'm sitting here trying not to sweat through my shirt because Cilla just implied I might meet her parents.

"My folks are a lot less intimidating," I say. "Dad'll probably try to show you his fishing lures, and Mom will force-feed you until you can't move."

"That sounds nice, actually." Cilla's voice has that soft quality again, the one that makes me want to build her a house with my bare hands. "I like people who are passionate about things."

Our eyes lock across the table, and the restaurant noise fades for a moment. There's just her—those blue eyes, that small smile, the way she tucks her hair behind her ear.

"I'm passionate about many things," I say, my voice dropping lower than intended.

Fox clears his throat loudly. "And on that note, I'm getting another round. Prue, want to help me carry?"

They disappear toward the bar, leaving me alone with Cilla for the first time all evening. The silence stretches between us, not uncomfortable but charged.

"Your friend is nice," she says finally. "I've never seen Prue laugh like that with someone she just met."

"Fox is a good guy. Doesn't usually talk this much, though." I lean forward, resting my forearms on the table. "Must be a Griffin sister effect."

"Is that what I have? An effect?" She's teasing, but there's a genuine question underneath.

"You know you do." The words come out more honestly than I intended. "I've been trying to get your attention since you moved in."

"With crown molding discussions?" Her smile is playful now.

"Hey, I've got other moves. I just..." I run a hand through my hair. "I forget them all when you're around."

Cilla's cheeks go pink again, and it's not embarrassing this time. She takes another sip of her wine, her eyes never leaving mine over the rim of her glass.

"You're not what I expected, Rowan Malone," she says.

"What did you expect?"

She shrugs one shoulder, a delicate movement that draws my attention to her collarbone, the gentle curve of her neck. "I thought you'd be like every other good-looking guy who knows he's good-looking. All confidence, no substance."

"And now?" I can't help the smile spreading across my face.

"Now I'm... reassessing." Her eyes flick down to my mouth for a moment before returning to meet my gaze.

"I'm glad to hear it," I say, voice lower than I intended. "Because I'm falling hard, Priscilla Griffin, and I hope you're coming along for the ride."

She smiles and leans forward to whisper in my ear. "Do you want to get out of here?"

"Yes, I do. More than I you'll ever know."

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rowan

The moment we step through her front door, her blue eyes lock on mine with an intensity I haven't seen before.

"Rowan," Cilla whispers against my mouth, and I'm lost.

Her lips are soft but demanding, and I can't help the groan that escapes me when her tongue slides against mine. My hands, which have been eager to touch her since our last date, finally get their chance. I run them down her sides, feeling the curve of her waist and the flare of her hips.

"I want you, Cilla. Is this okay?" I ask, my voice rougher than I intended.

"Yes," she breathes. "God, yes."

We stumble backward through her living room, bumping into furniture, neither of us willing to break the kiss long enough to watch where we're going. I hear the click of dog nails on the hardwood and glance down to see Birdie and Brody watching us with curious expressions, settling into their plush beds near the fireplace. For once, the inseparable dachshunds don't follow Cilla, as if they understand this moment is just for us.

"Your dogs are staring," I murmur against her neck.

Cilla laughs, the sound sending heat straight through me. "They won't interrupt. It's way past their bedtime."

Her hands tug at my shirt, and I help her pull it over my head. The cool air hits my chest, quickly replaced by the heat of her palms. I've built houses with these hands, but I've never felt so unsteady as I unbutton her blouse, revealing inch after inch of creamy skin and a lacy blue bra that matches her eyes.

"You're so beautiful," I tell her, meaning it more than any compliment I've ever given.

Cilla blushes. "Bedroom," she says, pointing down the hall.

I sweep her into my arms, her petite frame light against my chest, and she lets out a surprised squeak that turns into a giggle. "Show-off," she accuses, her eyes dark with desire.

"Construction has its benefits," I reply, carrying her down the hallway to her bedroom, where books are stacked on every surface and a large window overlooks the bay.

I crawl onto her bed, my body following hers down. Her auburn hair fans out across the pillows, and I take a moment just to look at her, to memorize this moment. I've wanted this—wanted her—since the first time I saw her, and I still can't quite believe she's letting me in.

Her fingers trace the lines of muscle on my stomach, and I struggle to keep my breathing steady as she moves down to the button of my jeans.

"Not fair," I murmur, leaning down to kiss her again. "You're still wearing too much."

She arches against me, a silent invitation I can't resist. I reach behind her, unhooking her bra with ease, and slide it down her arms. The sight of her bare breasts makes my mouth go dry. They're perfect—full and round with dusky pink nipples that harden

under my gaze.

"You're staring," she whispers, a hint of vulnerability in her voice.

"Can't help it." I lower my head, taking one nipple into my mouth, and her sharp intake of breath is all the encouragement I need. Her hands tangle in my hair, holding me against her as I lavish attention on first one breast, then the other.

Cilla's hips move restlessly beneath me, seeking friction. I slide my hand down her stomach to the waistband of her skirt, finding the zipper and tugging it down. She lifts her hips, helping me pull the fabric away, leaving her in nothing but a pair of lacy blue panties that match her discarded bra.

"Your turn," she says, pushing at my jeans.

I stand just long enough to shed them and my boxers before returning to her. The feel of her nearly naked body against mine sends electricity through every nerve ending. I kiss my way down her throat, between her breasts, across her stomach. Her skin tastes like rose water and something uniquely Cilla—something I already know I'll crave for the rest of my life.

My fingers hook into the sides of her panties, and I look up at her, seeking permission. Her blue eyes are dark with desire, her auburn hair wild against the pillows, and she nods.

"Please," she whispers.

I slide the lace down her legs, revealing all of her to me. She's exquisite—every inch of her. I lower myself between her thighs, pressing kisses to the inside of each one, working my way higher. When I finally taste her, her back arches off the bed, a soft moan escaping her lips.

"Oh my—god," she gasps, and I smile against her, thrilled by the soft moan that escapes her lips.

I take my time, learning what makes her breath catch and her fingers clench in my hair. Her thighs tremble against my shoulders as I circle my tongue around her clit, then suck gently. I slide one finger inside her, then two, curling them forward as I continue to use my mouth on her.

"Rowan," she moans, her voice desperate. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

I have no intention of stopping—not when she's writhing beneath me, not when the taste of her is driving me wild, not when every sound she makes pushes me closer to the edge myself.

Her hips rise to meet my mouth, her movements becoming more frantic as I feel her getting close. I hold her thighs, anchoring her to me as she starts to come undone.

"Fu... Rowan," she gasps, and I almost laugh at her instinctive censoring of her profanity, even now. But then her body tenses, her back arching beautifully as she cries out, pulsing against my tongue and fingers.

I work her through it, gentling my touch as she comes down, trembling and breathless. When I finally lift my head, she's looking at me with wide, dazed eyes.

"Come here," she whispers, tugging weakly at my shoulders.

I move up her body, bracing myself above her, drinking in the sight of her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. She reaches between us, wrapping her fingers around me, and it's my turn to groan.

Her fingers are gentle, and I have to close my eyes and count backward from ten to

maintain my control. When I open them again, she's watching my face with a curious intensity that makes my heart stutter.

"What?" I ask softly.

"I wasn't planning on this," she admits. "When I moved here, I was... I told myself I was done with relationships."

I brush her hair back from her face. "Is that what this is? A relationship?"

She bites her lip, suddenly looking vulnerable despite our intimacy. "I don't know what this is yet. But I know I want to find out."

That's all I need to hear. I lower myself to Cilla, capturing her mouth in a kiss that tries to convey everything I'm feeling—desire, yes, but also something deeper, something that's been growing since I first saw her struggling with those moving boxes.

I position myself at her entrance, pausing to look into her eyes again. "Ready?"

She nods, wrapping her legs around my waist, and I push forward slowly, both of us gasping as I fill her. For a moment, I don't move, just savoring the sensation of being inside her, of being with her in this way I've imagined countless times.

"You feel amazing," I murmur against her neck.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders. "Move, Rowan. Please."

I withdraw almost completely before sliding back in, establishing a rhythm that makes her moan beneath me. Her hips rise to meet mine, her body a perfect counterpoint to my own. I've been with women before, but never like this—never

where every touch, every thrust feels like coming home. Her nails scrape down my back, urging me on, and I can feel myself approaching the edge too quickly.

“Cilla,” I groan, trying to slow down, wanting this to last.

"It's okay," she whispers, her breath hot against my ear. "Let go. I've got you."

Those words—the simplicity and trust in them—push me over the edge. I bury my face in Cilla's neck as I come as her body tightens around mine, and I feel her following me, her second orgasm washing over her as she clings to me.

For several long moments, we lay tangled together, breathing hard, neither of us willing to break the connection. Finally, I roll to my side, keeping my beautiful girl close. Her hair is a mess, her lips swollen from my kisses, and I've never seen anything more beautiful.

"That was..." she starts, then laughs softly. "I don't even have words, and I'm supposed to be the academic."

I trace my finger along her collarbone. "I know what you mean." I pause, suddenly worried. "No regrets?"

Cilla turns to face me fully, her blue eyes serious. "No regrets," she says firmly. "Though I do have concerns about your ego. It was already huge before this."

I laugh, pulling her closer. "My ego is perfectly proportional to my skills, Professor Griffin."

"Is that so?" She raises an eyebrow, her hand trailing down my chest. I'll need more evidence before I can accept that hypothesis.

"I'm happy to provide as much evidence as you need," I tell her, feeling myself responding to her touch already. "I'm very dedicated to your research."

She smiles, the expression lighting up her whole face. "I've noticed that about you. Very thorough."

Moonlight spills across the bay outside her bedroom window, silvering the water. In the distance, I can just make out the lights of my own place down the shore. For years, I've looked across that water, building a life I thought was complete. With Cilla in my arms, I realize it was just the foundation.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest.

"How long I've wanted this," I admit. "Not just this—" I gesture between our naked bodies, "—but you. From the moment I saw you struggling to move boxes bigger than you, I knew you were for me."

"Those were precious family heirlooms," she protests. "And I would have managed fine if Birdie and Brody hadn't been underfoot."

"Sure you would have," I tease, remembering how she'd nearly toppled over when I'd first introduced myself. "Admit it—you needed me."

Her expression softens. "Maybe I did," she says quietly. "Maybe I still do."

"Good. Because I'm not going anywhere."

cilla

I wake up to the sound of Birdie and Brody whining outside the bedroom door, their nails scratching against the wood. Sunlight streams through the window, and I squint, disoriented for a moment still sore from Rowan's exquisite skills. Two months in and his prowess never ceases to amaze me.

I carefully extract myself from Rowan's warm embrace, trying not to wake him as I slip out of bed. I grab his discarded shirt from the floor and pull it over my head, the fabric drowning my small frame but smelling deliciously of him.

"Where are you going?" he mumbles, his voice thick with sleep.

"Dogs," I whisper. "They need to go out."

He makes a noise of acknowledgment and rolls onto his back, one muscular arm thrown over his eyes. I allow myself a moment to admire him—the broad expanse of his chest, the sheet draped dangerously low on his hips—before slipping out the door.

Birdie and Brody dance around my feet, their entire bodies wiggling excitedly.

"Alright, alright," I whisper. "Let's go outside before you wake the neighbors."

I let them into the backyard, standing on the porch in Rowan's shirt as they race around, sniffing everything with renewed interest, as if overnight, the yard had transformed into unexplored territory. The morning air is cool against my bare legs, the sky a watercolor of pinks and oranges as the sun rises over the bay.

My phone buzzes from inside, and I hurry back in to grab it from my purse, fearing it might be the department secretary with some emergency about my classes.

Instead, I see my mother's name on the screen.

"Oh, crap," I mutter. I'd completely forgotten my parents were coming today.

I answer the call, trying to sound like I haven't just rolled out of bed after the most incredible night. "Hi, Mom."

"Priscilla! We're at the airport. Your father is getting the rental car now. We should be at your place in about an hour his jaw. My heart does a little flip despite the panic setting in.

My stomach drops. "Now? I thought you weren't coming until this afternoon."

"We managed to get an earlier flight. Isn't that wonderful? More time together!"

I glance frantically around my living room. Clothes are scattered everywhere—my skirt hanging off the back of the couch, Rowan's jeans crumpled by the coffee table. And in my bedroom is a six-foot-four, very naked, very gorgeous man who my parents definitely aren't expecting to meet until I surprise them over dinner.

"That's... great," I say weakly. "See you soon."

I hang up and dash back to the bedroom, nearly tripping over Birdie and Brody, who have followed me inside. Rowan is sitting up now, looking unfairly gorgeous, his hair mussed and stubble darkening his jaw. My heart does a little flip despite the panic setting in.

"My parents are coming," I blurt out. "They're an hour away. Maybe less."

Rowan's eyes widen, and he sits up straighter. "I thought they weren't coming until later?"

"Earlier flight." I run a hand through my tangled hair. "We need to clean up. Fast."

He's out of bed in an instant, gloriously naked and seemingly unconcerned about it, as he starts gathering his clothes. "I'll help," he says, pulling on his boxers. "Just tell me what to do."

I'm momentarily distracted by the flex of his muscles as he bends to retrieve his socks. "Stop being so distracting and put some clothes on."

He offers a smile that still makes my knees weak. "You're wearing my shirt."

"You'll get it back when I find my clothes." I toss him his jeans. "Can you let the dogs out again while I shower? Then maybe straighten up the living room?"

Thirty minutes later, I've showered, dried my hair, and put on a sundress that says "responsible daughter" rather than "just had mind-blowing sex with the town's most eligible bachelor." The living room is spotless, and Rowan, now fully dressed, is in the kitchen making coffee.

"You didn't have to do that," I say, watching him measure grounds into my French press.

"I figured your parents might want coffee after their flight." He looks up, and his expression softens. "You look beautiful."

I feel my cheeks heat. After two months, Rowan still has this effect on me. "Thank you for helping. And for staying. You don't have to, you know. This wasn't exactly how I planned to introduce you."

He sets down the coffee and approaches me, his hands gentle on my waist. "I want to meet them, Cilla. Unless you'd rather I didn't?"

The uncertainty in his voice makes my heart ache. For all his confidence, there are moments when I glimpse the vulnerability underneath.

"No, I want you to meet them. I just..." I trail off, not sure how to explain my nervousness.

"They're important to you," he says simply. "So I want them to like me."

Before I can respond, the doorbell rings. Birdie and Brody erupt into a chorus of barks, racing toward the door.

"Showtime," I whisper, squeezing Rowan's hand before going to answer it.

My parents stand on the porch, and my mother's immaculate appearance makes me suddenly conscious of every dog hair on my furniture.

"Priscilla!" Mom exclaims, pulling me into a hug that smells of Chanel No. 5. "You look wonderful. Small-town life agrees with you."

Dad hugs me next, his familiar cologne bringing a rush of homesickness. "Hi, sweetheart," Dad says, his eyes crinkling at the corners when he smiles. "The drive up was gorgeous. You weren't kidding about the views."

They step inside, immediately noticing the two dachshunds dancing around their feet.

"And these must be the famous Birdie and Brody!" Mom coos, bending down to let them sniff her hands. "Oh, they're adorable, Cilla."

That's when Rowan steps out from the kitchen, and I watch my mother's eyes widen slightly. I can't blame her—he fills the doorway, broad-shouldered and handsome in a way that seems almost unfair.

"Mom, Dad," I say, my voice higher than usual, "this is Rowan. Rowan, these are my parents, Elizabeth and Richard Griffin."

Rowan steps forward with that easy confidence, extending his hand to my father first. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Cilla speaks very highly of you both."

Dad takes his hand, and I can see him doing the subtle assessment thing fathers do, his professor's eyes cataloging everything from Rowan's firm handshake to his posture.

"Rowan," Mom says, taking his hand next. "Are you a colleague of Priscilla's at the college?"

I suppress a smile. Leave it to my parents to assume anyone in my life must be another professor.

"No, ma'am," Rowan says with a charming smile. "I own Cedar Bay Construction. We build and renovate homes throughout the area."

"A builder!" Dad says, his interest visibly piquing. "That's fascinating. Did you study architecture?"

"Engineering, briefly," Rowan replies. "Before the Army. But I've always loved working with my hands."

I watch my mother's expression shift from polite interest to genuine curiosity. "The Army? How long did you serve?"

"Six years, ma'am."

"Please, call me Elizabeth," Mom says, and I have to stop myself from gaping. It took my last boyfriend three months to get permission to use first names.

"Coffee's ready," I interject, gesturing toward the kitchen. "And I have those pastries from the bakery by the pier."

As we move to the kitchen, I catch Rowan's eye, and he gives me a reassuring wink. The knot in my stomach loosens slightly.

"This is a lovely home, Cilla," Dad says, looking around appreciatively. "Original craftsman details, aren't they?"

"Yes," I say, pouring coffee into the mugs Rowan has already set out. "The woodwork is all original. The previous owner maintained it beautifully."

"Rowan," Mom says, accepting her coffee with a smile that I recognize as her networking face, "what kind of projects does your company typically handle?"

"Everything from new builds to historic renovations," Rowan answers with that quiet confidence I've come to love. "We're working on a waterfront property right now—a complete restoration of a 1920s home with some stunning original features."

"Like yours," Dad says to me, his eyes lighting up in that way they always do when he's thinking about real estate. My parents' hobby of buying and renovating old houses has been a constant throughout my childhood.

"You should see the view from Rowan's deck," I say, then immediately blush at how that might sound. "His house, I mean. It's right on the water."

Mom raises an eyebrow but mercifully doesn't comment. "Actually, Richard and I have been thinking about getting a place up here. Something small, for weekend visits and summers."

"And to check up on me," I add with a smile.

"Well, that too," Dad admits with a chuckle. He turns to Rowan. "Would your company be interested in handling a renovation if we found the right property? We've seen a few listings online that need quite a bit of work."

I nearly choke on my coffee. Leave it to my parents to start interviewing Rowan as a contractor before they've even unpacked.

"I'd be honored," Rowan says, and I can tell he means it. "I could show you some of our completed projects while you're in town."

"Wonderful!" Mom claps her hands together. "We have an appointment with a realtor tomorrow. Perhaps you could join us?"

"Mom," I interject, "Rowan is very busy. I'm sure he?—"

"I'd love to," Rowan says, shooting me a look that clearly says it's fine. "Always happy to save someone from making a costly mistake on a property."

Dad nods approvingly. "Smart man. The listing we're most interested in is on Devon Street. Beautiful bones, but the realtor mentioned some foundation issues."

"The old Harrington place?" Rowan asks. When Dad nods, Rowan continues, "I know it well. Beautiful craftsmanship, but you're right about the foundation. The west corner has been settling for years."

Dad looks impressed, and I feel a strange surge of pride. Rowan knows his stuff, and my academic parents respect expertise regardless of the field.

"So," Mom says, settling into one of my kitchen chairs and fixing us with that penetrating gaze that used to make me confess to sneaking cookies before dinner, "how long have you two been dating?"

"Mom!" I protest.

"What? It's a perfectly reasonable question. You've never mentioned Rowan in our calls."

I glance at Rowan, who looks completely unruffled. "Two months," he says easily. "But I've been trying to get Cilla to notice me since she moved in."

"Really?" Mom's expression is delighted. "Do tell."

"I brought her welcome cookies," Rowan says, the corner of his mouth quirking up in that smile that still makes my stomach flip. "She was polite but...reserved."

I roll my eyes but can't help smiling. "I was focused on unpacking. And my dissertation."

"And avoiding the local bachelor," Rowan adds, his eyes twinkling.

"You have quite the reputation around here," I explain to my parents, who are watching our exchange with undisguised interest.

"All exaggerated," Rowan protests, but there's a hint of color on his cheeks.

"The high school football hero turned soldier turned successful businessman?" I

tease. "None of that is exaggerated."

Dad leans forward. "You played football? What position?"

"Quarterback," Rowan replies, and I can see Dad's interest pique further. My father, the distinguished professor of Philosophy, harbors a not-so-secret passion for college football.

"He was being scouted for Division I schools," I add, feeling that strange pride again.

"Until I blew out my knee senior year," Rowan finishes, without a trace of self-pity. "The best thing that could have happened to me, honestly. Made me figure out what I really wanted."

Mom's approving nod tells me she's mentally checking boxes on whatever scorecard she keeps for my potential partners. I feel a flutter of anxiety—this is happening too fast. We haven't even had the "what are we" conversation yet, and here he is charming my parents like he's auditioning for the role of son-in-law.

"Are you the friend who took Cilla whale watching? Do you have a boat?" Dad asks, and I groan internally. Dad's subtle as a sledgehammer.

"Yes, sir. Nothing fancy, but she's seaworthy. I take her out fishing whenever I can."

"Richard loves fishing," Mom says, giving me a meaningful look. "Perhaps you could take him out while we're here?"

"Mom," I begin, but Rowan cuts me off.

"I'd be happy to. The salmon are running right now. We could go tomorrow afternoon, after the real estate appointments?"

Dad's face lights up. "That sounds perfect."

I watch in disbelief as Rowan and my father start discussing fishing spots and tackle, while my mother catches my eye and mouths, "He's so handsome," with an exaggerated wink.

"I'm going to get more coffee," I announce, grabbing my mug and escaping to the kitchen.

Mom follows me, of course. "He's wonderful, Cilla," she says in a stage whisper.

"He's... yes, he is," I admit, keeping my voice low. "But this is all happening very fast."

"Life happens fast sometimes," she says, taking the coffee pot from my hands. "Your father and I got engaged after three months."

"That was different. You were both academics. You had common ground."

"And you don't?" Mom raises an eyebrow. "I see the way he looks at you, Priscilla. That's not casual interest."

I busy myself with refilling my mug, trying to ignore the warmth spreading through my chest at her words. "We're still figuring things out."

"Well, figure faster. Men like that don't stay available long." She pats my arm. "And I want grandchildren while I'm still young enough to enjoy them."

"Mom!" I hiss, glancing toward the living room where Rowan and Dad are now bent over Dad's phone, presumably looking at real estate listings.

"What? Prue has made it clear she's focusing on her career for the foreseeable future. You're my best hope."

I roll my eyes but can't help smiling. Some things never change. "Let's get through this visit before you start planning my wedding, okay?"

She gives me a knowing look. "Speaking of the visit, we should probably check into our hotel and freshen up. Dinner tonight?"

"I made reservations at La Marina for seven," I tell her, relieved at the subject change. "It's the best restaurant in town."

We return to the living room where Rowan is now showing Dad something on his phone.

"These are the Harrington place interior shots," he's saying. "Beautiful original millwork, but look at the slope in this doorway. The classic sign of foundation issues."

Dad nods, looking impressed. "You've got a good eye."

"Years of practice," Rowan says modestly. He looks up as we enter. "Your daughter has an eye for it too. She spotted water damage that even my inspector missed on her bathroom ceiling."

I blink, surprised he remembered that casual comment from weeks ago.

"We should head to the hotel," Mom announces. "Cilla says we're having dinner at La Marina tonight. Will you be joining us, Rowan?"

"Of course," I say, smiling at him. "Seven o'clock."

"Perfect!" Mom beams. "Richard, we should go. Let these two young people have some time before dinner."

I walk my parents to the door, accepting their hugs and promising to text the restaurant address. As soon as they're in their rental car, I shut the door and lean against it, exhaling heavily.

"That wasn't so bad," Rowan says, his expression amused.

"They ambushed us," I say, watching my parents' car disappears down the street. "My mother is probably already mentally planning our wedding."

Rowan laughs, standing behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist. "Is that such a terrible thought?"

My heart skips a beat, and I turn in his arms to face him. "We've only been dating for two months."

"Two incredible months," he murmurs, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "And I spent three months before that trying to get you to notice me."

"With cookies and 'accidental' run-ins while I was walking the dogs?" I tease, trying to keep the mood light despite the sudden flutter in my chest.

"Hey, those were legitimate coincidences." His smile fades slightly, his expression turning more serious. "Your parents are great, by the way."

"They liked you," I admit. "A lot. My dad doesn't offer to go fishing with just anyone."

"And is that okay with you? That they like me?"

There's something vulnerable in his question that makes my breath catch. Rowan, who exudes confidence in everything he does, is worried about what I think.

"Of course it's okay. It's just..." I trail off, unsure how to express my jumble of emotions.

"Just what?" he prompts gently.

"Fast. Intense." I bite my lip. "I came here to focus on my dissertation and teaching, not to fall for the town's most eligible bachelor. It's just a lot at once."

His eyes widen slightly at the word "fall," and I realize what I've implied.

"Is that what's happening?" he asks, his voice low. "You're falling for me?"

I should backpedal. Make a joke. Keep things casual. But looking up at Rowan, at the hope in his eyes, I can't bring myself to do it.

"Maybe," I whisper. "And it terrifies me."

"Why?"

"Because I had a plan. Because relationships complicate things. Because..." I take a deep breath. "Because you could hurt me if this doesn't work out."

His hands come up to frame my face, gentle but sure. "Cilla Griffin, I have been crazy about you since I saw you struggle to carry that hefty box of books up your front steps. Every day since then has only made me more certain."

"Certain of what?" My voice is barely audible.

"That you're it for me." He says it simply, without grand gestures or flowery words, just absolute conviction.

"Rowan—"

"I'm not proposing," he says with a small smile. "Not yet, anyway. I know we're still getting to know each other. But I want you to know where I stand. I'm all in, Cilla."

I should be running for the hills. This is precisely the kind of commitment that I've been avoiding. But looking at Rowan—this man who fixed my leaky bathroom ceiling, who remembers how I take my coffee, who never complains when Birdie and Brody steal his side of the bed—I realize I'm all in, too.

"I think I'm falling in love with you," I whisper, the words terrifying and liberating all at once.

His smile is radiant. "I think I fell for you the moment you told me my welcome cookies were 'adequate at best.'"

I laugh, remembering how rude I'd been that day, stressed from unpacking and wary of the too-handsome neighbor with the reputation. "They were store-bought. I could tell."

"They absolutely were," he admits, pulling me closer. "But I was too nervous to bake. The great Rowan Malone was reduced to buying cookies because a five-foot-two professor made him forget how to operate an oven."

"I'm glad you persisted despite my rudeness."

"The best decision I ever made." He kisses me softly, then pulls back with a grin. "So, your dad and I are going fishing tomorrow..."

"You don't have to do that," I say quickly. "I know you're busy with the Wilson project."

"I want to," he says simply. "Besides, Tobias and Fox can handle things for a day. And it'll give me a chance to ask your dad's permission."

My heart stops. "Permission for what?"

His eyes dance with mischief. "To renovate their new house, of course. What did you think I meant?"

I swat his arm, relief and something like disappointment flooding through me. "You're terrible."

"And you love it." He kisses me again, deeper this time until I'm pressed against the door, my hands tangled in his hair.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, I rest my forehead against his chest. "We should probably get ready for dinner."

"Or," he says, his voice low and suggestive, "we could take advantage of having the house to ourselves for a few more hours."

I laugh, already pulling him toward the bedroom. "I like the way you think, Malone."

As Birdie and Brody trot after us, I realize that sometimes the best things in life are the ones you never planned for. And sometimes, they live right down the street.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

Rowan

The ceremony is starting in twenty minutes, and I can't seem to get this damn bowtie straight. I've tied it three times, but it keeps coming out crooked. I could blame it on nerves, but the truth is, I've never been more certain of anything in my life.

"Need some help there, Romeo?" Fox appears in the doorway of the guest suite, already perfectly dressed in his best man tuxedo.

"Please," I say, dropping my hands in defeat. "How are you so good at this?"

Fox steps forward, his usually stoic face softened by a rare smile. "I guess all that military training didn't go to waste."

As he fixes my tie with practiced efficiency, I glance out the window at the historic inn's grounds. The ceremony space overlooking the bay is decorated with white chairs and an arch woven with cedar branches and wildflowers. Guests are already being seated, a mix of our families, colleagues, and townspeople who've become friends over the past year.

"Nervous?" Fox asks, stepping back to inspect his handiwork.

"Not about marrying her," I answer honestly. "Just about tripping over my words during the vows."

He chuckles. "You've faced down angry clients and building inspectors. You can handle saying 'I do' without passing out."

"Speaking of passing out, is Cole recovered from last night?"

"He's downing coffee like it's the elixir of life, but he'll make it." Fox hands me my jacket. "Your future father-in-law is keeping him company, sharing hangover cures from his college days. But he swears it's your fault for not telling him Mabel Maxwell was attending your wedding. Seeing her at the rehearsal dinner blew his mind."

"She's my cousin—of course, she'd be here. Besides, they broke up fifteen years ago. Who knew he'd still be nursing a broken heart?" I shake my head and check my cuff links. "I just hope he's not embarrassing me in front of Cilla's dad."

I smile, thinking about how close Richard and I have become. That fishing trip a year ago had been the start of a genuine friendship. He'd given his blessing without me even having to ask, telling me over beers and the day's catch that he'd "never seen Priscilla so happy."

"Have you seen my bride?" I can't help asking.

Fox gives me a knowing look. "Yes, but Prue instructed me not to share information with you. She says it's bad luck."

My heart stutters in my chest. In a few minutes, I'll watch Cilla walk down the aisle toward me, and I still can't quite believe my luck.

"Your mom is already crying, by the way," Fox adds, adjusting his tie in the mirror. "Your dad's pretending he's not about to join her."

I laugh, picturing my stoic father fighting back tears. "They've been waiting for this day since I hit thirty. Mom was starting to think I'd never settle down."

"Can you blame her? Your dating history before Cilla was..."

"A disaster," I finish for him. "I know."

There's a knock at the door, and my father pokes his head in. "It's time, son."

I take a deep breath, straightening my shoulders. "How do I look?"

"Like a man about to get everything he's ever wanted," my father says, with a warmth that catches me off guard.

Fox claps me on the shoulder. "Let's go make an honest man of you."

The walk to the ceremony space feels surreal. Guests smile as I pass, but I barely register their faces. All I can think about is Cilla and the tiny secret we're keeping—our baby, growing inside her, just two months along. We decided to wait until after the honeymoon to share the news, wanting this day to be about our marriage, not impending parenthood, though sometimes I catch myself wanting to shout it from the rooftops.

I take my place under the arch, the bay stretching out behind me, sparkling in the afternoon sun. My mother dabs at her eyes in the front row. Next to her, Cilla's mother looks equally emotional, though she's holding it together with the characteristic Griffin restraint.

The string quartet begins playing, and the first down the aisle is Prue, lovely in deep blue, followed by Cilla's college roommate, Jenna. I notice Fox's eyes tracking Prue's every move and hide a smile. Those two have been dancing around each other for months now.

Then the music changes and everyone rises. The moment stretches like taffy, and then—there she is.

Cilla stands at the end of the aisle on her father's arm, and I forget how to breathe.

Her dress is simple and elegant, falling in soft waves to the ground, her auburn hair swept up with a few curls framing her face. She looks like something out of a dream, but the smile she gives me is pure Cilla—slightly lopsided, completely genuine, and just for me.

As she walks toward me, I remember the day she moved to Cedar Bay and how I'd fallen for her before she'd even finished unloading her car. How those dachshunds of hers had tangled their leashes around her legs. How she'd resisted my charm for weeks until I finally won her over.

Richard places Cilla's hand in mine when they reach me, and I feel a slight tremor in her fingers.

"Hi," she whispers, and I can see in her eyes she's thinking about our secret, too.

"Hi yourself, Dr. Griffin," I murmur back, pride swelling in my chest for her recently completed dissertation.

"Not quite yet," she reminds me with a wink.

"Soon enough."

The officiant begins the ceremony, but I'm only half listening. I'm too busy memorizing every detail of this moment—the way the sunlight catches in Cilla's blue eyes, how Birdie and Brody sit attentively in their doggy tuxedos beside Prue, the scent of cedar and salt air mingling with the flowers. My entire life has led me to this woman, this moment, and I can't help but feel that all my past mistakes were worth it because they brought me here.

Cilla squeezes my hands, and I pull the folded paper from my pocket. My hands are surprisingly steady as I unfold it, but my voice wavers slightly when I begin.

"Cilla, before you moved in next door, I thought I knew what I wanted from life. What I didn't know was that I was waiting for you—for your brilliance, your kindness, your stubborn determination to see the best in people, even grumpy contractors who wouldn't stop knocking on your door."

She laughs softly, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I promise to be your constant, your safe harbor. I promise to support your dreams and ambitions and to be your partner in all things. And I promise—" my voice catches, and I have to take a breath before continuing, "I promise to help build a home and a family filled with as much love and laughter as you've brought into my life."

I fold the paper back up, slipping it into my pocket. "I love you, Dr. Griffin-to-be. More than I knew it was possible to love another person."

Her eyes shimmer with tears, but her smile is radiant as she takes out her own vows. Her hands tremble slightly, and I know it's not just wedding nerves—morning sickness has been hitting her hard this week, though she's powering through it with typical Cilla determination.

"Rowan," she begins, her voice clear despite the emotion in her eyes. "When I moved to Cedar Bay, I had a plan. Finish my dissertation, teach my classes, walk my dogs, and absolutely, positively not fall in love with the handsome contractor down the street."

The crowd laughs, and I can't help grinning.

"But you've taught me that the best parts of life are the ones we don't plan for." Her hand drifts briefly, unconsciously, to her stomach before she catches herself. "You built more than houses—you built a space in my heart I didn't know was empty. You taught me that being serious about my work doesn't mean I can't be serious about

love, too."

She takes a steadying breath. "I promise to be your harbor in every storm. I promise to challenge you when you need to be challenged and support you when you need support. I promise to build our life together with the same care and attention to detail that you put into everything you create."

When we exchange rings, her hands are steady, but mine shake slightly.

"By the power vested in me," the officiant says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

I cup Cilla's face gently in my hands and kiss her, trying to pour everything I'm feeling into that one gesture. When we break apart, her cheeks are flushed, and there's that look in her eyes that still makes my heart race after all this time.

We turn to face our guests, who erupt in applause. Birdie and Brody start barking in excitement, and someone—probably Cole—lets out a wolf whistle.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the officiant announces, "I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Rowan and Priscilla Malone."

As we walk back down the aisle together, rice and flower petals showering us from all sides, I can't help but lean down and whisper in her ear.

"How are you feeling? You and...the little hitchhiker?"

Cilla squeezes my hand, her smile radiant. "We're both perfect. Though your child is already demanding snacks. I'm starving."

"Well, Mrs. Malone, let's get you two fed."

She wrinkles her nose slightly. "That's Dr. Griffin-Malone to you, mister."

"I stand corrected," I laugh, pulling her closer as we make our way to the reception tent.

As we take our seats, I notice Birdie and Brody have been given places of honor near Cilla's parents, each with a small plate of what appears to be specially prepared dog-friendly wedding food. My mother-in-law catches me looking and gives an elegant shrug that clearly says, "What did you expect?"

The End